

DELL
BOOK
719

JAMES M. FOX

25¢

A Johnny and Suzy Marshall Mystery

the **IRON VIRGIN**



SHE HAD IT . . .

Jean Hendrix had what it took to get all kinds of offers from all kinds of men. From her Hollywood vantage point she worked her red-headed magic . . . and made it rough on the guys who fell. With her determined ambitions and her pin-up figure, it wasn't hard at all.

Then one day she vanished.

It was Johnny Marshall's job to find her. The trail led him to the mansion of a Hollywood artist who had promised Jean a movie career; to Las Vegas, where luck paid off better than talent; and to Mexico, where beautiful women worked in films designed for selected male audiences.

It was a tough case, but Johnny (with the help of his ubiquitous wife Suzy, and Khan, their faithful great Dane) saw it through to one of the most startling and horrifying climaxes in years.

THE IRON VIRGIN

By James M. Fox

the **IRON
VIRGIN**

JAMES M. FOX

Author of:

THE SCARLET SLIPPERS

THE WHEEL IS FIXED

FATAL IN FURS

(The Aleutian Blue Mink)

THE GENTLE HANGMAN, etc.

A DELL MYSTERY

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All the characters, places and incidents in this book are drawn from real life. That is, such things as these have happened, and such people do exist. They are, of course, not recognizable at all, and could not be identified, because their names and numbers and sexes and physical characteristics have been duly scrambled in compliance with the libel laws.

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1

THE HYPODERMIC NEEDLE punctured my gum at a spot that felt like several inches away from the lower right molar the dentist had been poking at with corkscrew, chisel, claw hammer and air hose full of stale cold iodoform. I grunted, more in disgust than in pain, and determinedly focused my eyes through the window on a patch of dust-blue afternoon sky in the ragged pattern of November rain clouds, torn to pieces by a blustery southwester that came rocketing across from the Pacific through the distant yellow canyons of the Baldwin Hills.

Dr. Elmer B. Wittels chuckled cozily. "On target," he assured me. "Yes sir, Marshall, we have got that baby bracketed and roadblocked off as nice as pie. This isn't gonna hurt one teensy little bit." He stepped away from me, and checked the empty syringe with a glance against the lights, and favored me with a moonfaced, blandly professional smile.

I grunted some more and spat in his shiny black onyx disposal bowl where the water swirled and gurgled musically, and watched him fiddling around in his little instrument drawers, selecting a drill. He was a big, good-natured, paunchy citizen with large soft clever hands that were happy only when they were messing with tools in your mouth. He'd been messing in mine ever since we were both in the Army, a fact he forever insisted upon recalling to mind in his patter of talk.

"Yes, sir," he told me cheerfully. "That's quite a

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handy little foxhole you've got down there, Marshall. I wouldn't be at all surprised if we strike oil." He fitted the drill bit into his infernal machine with a click and a flourish, and tripped the switch to allow it an experimental whir.

I scowled at it, and more to stall for time than anything inquired: "Where is that luscious redhead nurse of yours? You never have to feed me dope when she's around to hold my hand."

The moonfaced smile went slightly on the wane. "Miss Hendrix let me down today," he told me with a shrug.

"That so? You mean she didn't show?"

He nodded, absently. "She went AWOL on me," he confessed in good humor. "Not so much as a phone call to excuse herself. Can't keep girls on the job any more these days—no sense of professional responsibility. They go off on a toot, or skedaddle to Yuma with their young man to get hitched at the drop of a cocktail glass. You know how it is."

"I thought this one would stick it out for quite a while," I said.

He shrugged again and poked a finger at my jaw. "How does it feel?"

"Like a snootful of spoiled mashed potatoes, it feels."

"That's fine," he promised me, and tripped the switch.

For a couple of very long minutes the noise of an airplane propeller grinding up my jaw inhibited all other pleasantries. Then he stepped back again and squirted at me with a hemlock and ammonia concoction. When he saw my face his chubby smile came back on tap. "You should've come next month. At Christmas time I use a bourbon spray."

“What does Miss Hendrix use at Christmas time?”

He dutifully grinned, changed drills and pushed at my tongue with his mirror. “Mmm. Not bad, not good . . .” The new drill made a sound like flint on glass. “That’s more like it,” he said. “Little close to the nerve. We better put a treatment filling in and fix you up next week.” He stuffed my mouth with gauze and hung a suction drainer on my lower lip. I gagged and glared at him, convincingly enough.

He got busy with mortar and pestle, mixing up chemicals into a creamy paste. “Almost forgotten how to whip these up myself,” he mentioned cheerfully. “You get so you depend on a competent nurse, when she’s been with you for a year or two.”

“Ulp argh aow?” I inquired, a trifle doubtfully.

“Well, no, that’s not quite all,” he admitted. “Of course it’s a fact that a good-looking redhead does help to pull in the customers. She doesn’t even have to hold their hands—a patient comes in here, he’s glad of anything at all to take his mind off me, you know. Just like those pin-ups at a company C.P., to build morale.” He played the air hose on my excavated molar, cased it critically with his mirror and inserted half a dump-truck load of goo. He put his thumb on it to hold it down, as if he feared it might jump out again.

The door to the waiting room opened behind my back, and heavy dog paws scrabbled furiously on the slick linoleum. A cool soprano, fragrant with magnolia blossoms, spoke up urgently. “Down, Khan honey, down! You-all behave now, suh! The nice man’s only playin’ with the boss, you heah?”

Dr. Elmer B. Wittels hurriedly removed his thumb and smiled uncertainly over my shoulder. The cool so-

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prano warmed a little, dropped the Southern accent on its head and said: "It's perfectly all right. He understands me when I talk like that."

"Yes, ma'am. I hope he does. . . ."

I peeked around. The tawny great Dane lay as quiet as a statue on the floor, his huge, ferocious, yellow head poised at an angle, ears alert, translucent yellow eyes regarding us with keen astonishment. At the end of his leash he wore a slender, medium-sized brunette in a silver-gray Persian lamb that matched her eyes. "Argh awk!" I said, and grinned at them, affectionately fatuous.

"Johnny, such language! Has he been á sissy, Doctor, like he always is?"

The dentist slipped the cotton plugs out of my mouth, unhooked the bib that protected my shirt front and tie, and chuckled benevolently. "I've never met a real stoic in this office, Mrs. Marshall," he instructed her, and gingerly reached out to rub the dog between his ears. He was rewarded by a distant growl, and by black lips briskly withdrawn, exhibiting a set of gleaming fangs that would have served to shock a pregnant grizzly bear.

"You've met one now," I said. "Don't worry, Doc. He's only showing you he doesn't need a treatment filling."

"Well, you better be careful with yours," the dentist said. He inspected his hand to make sure it still mustered five fingers. "It oughtn't to bother you much if you leave it alone. Don't bite on it today; take liquids for your dinner." He leafed through his appointment book. "Let's see now, this is Friday—how about next Wednesday afternoon at four?"

"Sounds fine," I said. "If I should get hung up on a

case, I'll call you, Doc."

He blinked at me, and at the little woman, owlishly, behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "How's business? You two are certainly the most unlikely-looking characters for going around peeping over transoms. Is there any dough in it?"

"Not in this screwy town," I said.

It was the kind of answer he expected; people seem to be convinced that a private investigator works for peanuts, either raiding hotel rooms occupied by guilty couples or putting the arm on those vicious if slightly improbable killers who sell breakfast food or hair oil on the radio. It seems hard to explain, even to your best friends, that this is not the deal. I don't handle divorce work, which happens to be a badly overcrowded and uninteresting specialty, like chiropraxis is in medicine, and I don't handle murder unless murder handles me. Any private detective is simply a small-time professional man, a sort of cross between a lawyer and an accountant, who gets reasonably well paid for finding facts, locating stolen goods, protecting valuable property. His best, most profitable clients are attorneys and insurance companies.

The little woman tossed her chestnut curls and asked: "Where is Miss Hendrix, Dr. Wittels, please? I promised her the pattern for a dress of mine last week, when I was in for my checkup, remember?" She fished in her purse and produced a crumpled yellow envelope.

The dentist glanced at it, a little doubtfully.

"She isn't here today," he said. "She'll probably be in tomorrow, if you'd like to leave that on her desk."

I pursed my lips at him. He was one of those smugly contented, heavyweight family men; he'd been married

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for fifteen years and was always showing you pictures of his five children, but he still didn't know about women. Mrs. Suzanne Willet Marshall had her eyebrows raised for him, way up to here.

"Probably?" she queried with deceptive geniality.

"He can't be sure," I interceded hurriedly. "She didn't call or send a message."

"Isn't that a little strange?"

I didn't think so, but I knew she would. A woman will either exaggerate or deny altogether the minor vagaries and weaknesses of her own sex, which an employer long has been disposed to take for granted. Doc Wittels squirmed under the implication of his negligence. "Perhaps I should have phoned her myself," he smiled uneasily.

"Well, after all," said Suzy, sweetly reasonable, "people do have accidents. But I suppose her family . . ."

"She hasn't any. Both her parents died three years ago. A truck ran over them," said Dr. Wittels, and he wasn't smiling any more. "Let's just make sure," he volunteered, and dropped into his swivel chair behind the phone.

I slipped into my overcoat and gave myself a cigarette and rubbed my jaw, where the Novocain still settled like a worn-out tennis ball. My watch said ten past five; outside it had begun to rain again, and dusk was slowly creeping over Wilshire Boulevard—twelve stories down, the endless triple stream of homebound traffic glittered nervously in white and red.

"Her number doesn't answer," Dr. Wittels said. He frowned at us, as if he couldn't quite believe himself.

"What sort of place is it?" the little woman asked. "Does she have an apartment by herself?"

He shook his head. "She has a roommate, I believe. A Miss O'Neal, who works downtown someplace."

I said: "Call ANgeles 1441, if you are really worried. That's the Index at the Sheriff's Office. They're supposed to get reports from every hospital in town." It didn't seem considerate to mention that they also got reports from County Jail and from the morgue.

He frowned some more and spun the dial. Khan relaxed and dropped his head between his paws on the linoleum, and promptly started snoring. Suzy tucked her arm through mine and smiled at me, for no good reason that I could see. I killed my cigarette in the disposal bowl and rubbed my jaw.

Dr. Wittels hung up and ran a finger round the starched white collar of his jacket. "They haven't anything," he said. He did not seem to be relieved.

"She carries identification, doesn't she?" the little woman asked.

"She drives a car. It's pretty old, though, and she's always having trouble with it. Wish I'd thought of that before."

"Mind if I use your phone?" I said.

He pushed it over to me on the desk, without a word. I dialed Information, glanced down at the card he'd pulled out from his records and inquired: "What's listed for 995 North Normandie?"

The operator said: "One moment, please, sir," and came right back on. "That's an apartment house. The Byron Arms. We have some twenty numbers listed there. You have a name?"

"I want the manager."

"One moment, please." She took a little longer. "Sorry, sir, we have no listing for a manager."

"Is there a Mrs. Somebody-or-other in Apartment 1?"

"There is a Mrs. Elsa Lesnevich. She's in 1A."

"That's good enough for me," I said.

The operator sniffed and rattled off a number on the HOLLYWOOD exchange. I cut her off and dialed it; it rang six times before the click of the receiver came and a beery, heavily accented man's voice said, "Yah, what iss?"

"Are you the manager?"

There was a distant muttering, a pause, and then a warily composed contralto. "Who is this?"

"I'm calling to inquire . . ."

"We got no vacancies."

"Nobody has," I said. "There's a Miss Hendrix at your place. I'd like to . . ."

"Fifteen B. She's got a phone."

"It doesn't answer, and she didn't show up on the job today. I want to find out if she is all right."

The cagey contralto had acquired a tang of surliness. "Look, Mister, all I'm here for is collect the rent and see the tenants don't bust up the joint. If 15B don't answer, maybe whasamatter with her is she's got a cold or something, she don't wanna talk to you. Why don'tcha . . ." Suddenly she stopped, there was a jumble of confused backstage talk, then a fresh, much younger female voice, a little breathless from excitement. "Doctor Wittels?"

"This," I said, "is Dr. Wittels' office. Is that you, Miss Hendrix?"

"No. Oh, no! You mean she really isn't there?" It sounded almost like a wail. "But I was *sure* . . . I tried to call you in my lunch hour, and the phone was busy, and I've been so *rushed* all day! Then I came home just now, and didn't find her, so I came straight down again

to see if she had left some word with Mrs. Lesnevich, and . . . Oh, Doctor, I can't *understand* what's got into Jean!"

I clapped my hand across the mouthpiece and beckoned to the dentist. "Better talk to her. I've got the roommate on the wire. She seems upset."

He put his handkerchief away and grabbed for the receiver. "Dr. Wittels speaking," he announced urbanely. "Miss O'Neal? . . . No, I'm afraid I haven't seen her . . . no, she didn't phone. How's that? . . . Why no, of course not, that is perfectly all right, my dear. Just tell me what has happened, and I'll . . . Yes, I see . . . Uh-huh . . . Uh-huh. . . ." The phone kept crackling, on and on, and he kept making soothing noises into it.

He managed finally to extricate himself, and ran both of his smooth pudgy hands through the receding remnants of his hair. "Phe-ew! These Irish gals—they really bend your ear!" he complained.

"Can we do anything, Dr. Wittels?" offered Suzy, just as blandly as a nun.

I shot a glance at her that would have squelched the Fuller Brush man, but the damage had been done. He was staring at us, rather speculatively, as if he were thirsty and we looked like just the type who might buy him a drink.

"She's disappeared," he said. "She had a fight with her young man and ran away last night. I don't suppose it's any of my business."

"She must be over twenty-one," I said.

"Since last July. She looks older, of course, and she's learned how to handle herself pretty well, with the boys." He grinned at us, not quite embarrassed. "Now, don't get the wrong idea. You know me, Marshall; I

don't play games with the help. It's just that I'd feel better if I knew for sure she didn't get herself in trouble. How's about you people finding out what she's up to, and I'll knock fifty dollars from your bill this year?"

Right there he had me, smack across the barrel; probably he didn't even realize it, but I couldn't turn him down unless I pointed out to him that fifty pays a competent investigator for one day, not counting in expenses. If I told him that, I might as well change dentists there and then. He'd simply make a mental note to charge me Hollywood on future work and get his money back but fast.

"It all depends," I said. "We have the week end open, and if you insist we'll play along with you. The only thing, this is a little bit out of our line. You'd better get it straight that we can't guarantee results."

He beamed upon me with his quickly-waxing moon smile. "Fair enough. Just snoop around a bit and see what you can do. Call me at home as soon as you've got news. It's likely no more than a false alarm."

His tone was one of affable dismissal; now that he'd slipped us the ball he wanted us to run with it. The little woman fixed him with a coolly speculative eye. "Who's this young man of hers? What were they quarreling about?"

"One of my patients, Barton Nichols. He's an artist, and a pretty good one—does a lot of painting for the studios. Jean brought him in, last August; I believe they had met socially before. Impacted wisdom tooth. She seemed impressed with him all right—I got the notion that she'd set her cap for him, and sure enough, two weeks ago she made a point of showing me his ring."

"So why the brannigan?" I said.

He shrugged, elaborately, almost too elaborately. "Don't ask me. Miss O'Neal didn't tell me, though she mentioned Jean had broken the engagement with a telegram, last night."

"How very odd," said Suzy, frowning at him.

"What I think. But all day yesterday she did have something on her mind. She dropped some stuff, and she forgot to book a couple of appointments. Then in the afternoon I let her go a little earlier than usual, because she said she had a date. Of course for all I knew she meant with Nichols, only Miss O'Neal tells me she came straight home, and changed, and packed a bag, and went right out again. Her fiancé phoned while she was still there, but she refused to speak with him. That must have been how it came out about the telegram. Miss O'Neal didn't know what to make of it all, but of course she assumed that Jean would be back in the office today, unless I'd given her the week end off."

"Sounds like a simple lovers' spat," I said. "But we will check the deal and let you know, if you're uncomfortable about it, Doc."

He drummed his clever, pudgy fingers on the blotter of his desk and stared past me at the wall.

"It may be silly," he admitted. "But I guess I am."

2

THE BYRON ARMS was more or less on our way home. It was one of a row of identical stucco apartment-house boxes running both sides of the block. It looked about twenty years old and had needed a maintenance crew since the early days of rent control. Two rows of limp geraniums, a T-shaped strip of unmowed lawn and sixty feet or so of broken tile walk separated its two-story wings. A weathered signpost pointed vaguely from the lawn at the north wing and stated **MANAGER, NO VACANCIES**. A second sign dictated **NO SOLICITORS, DELIVERIES IN REAR**. It was the kind of place where any working girl could find a furnished double for say sixty-five a month, if she was handy with a paint brush and a floor mop and she had a hundred dollars in her wallet that were wasting space.

I parked under the eucalyptus tree out front and pushed my collar up. It wasn't raining hard, but what there was of it lashed at the Packard's windshield with a nasty snap. The dog rose ponderously from his back-seat perch and yawned politely at the interruption and flopped back to sleep. The little woman huddled in her furs and shot a sidelong glance at me. "Johnny, you look unhappy. . . ."

"You're not kidding. This was your idea, not mine. I don't mind chasing dizzy redheads, but I wouldn't pick a night like this for it."

"Or any night when you had me along," she echoed sweetly. "Darling, I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. But Miss Hendrix has always been so nice to us, and she isn't the type to run off in a tantrum like that. She must have had a reason for it, something pretty big that troubled her a lot."

"Oh, sure. Look, pussy cat, this happens to be Hollywood, where half the female population throws a tantrum every hour, on the hour. I'm not in business to check on those at fifty dollars each. It doesn't take a private dick; it takes a good five-cent psychiatrist, that's what it takes." I saw the dashboard light reflected in her eyes and grinned at her. "Okay, let's go. I guess we're stuck with it."

She meekly tried to match my stride along the tile walk, clinging to my arm. Fifteen B was upstairs, the apartment in the southwest corner of the building on the second floor, just a door with the number, at the intersection of two narrow corridors lined with a badly frayed green carpet runner. I knocked and leaned against the stucco wall where the shoulder-high stains seemed to indicate others had leaned before.

Time passed, without another sound. From down the corridor a smell of bacon frying crept into my nose, and stirred a physical response inside me. I rubbed my jaw and knocked again, less tactfully. There was a sudden click of heel taps on bare wood, and the adjoining door with 14B on it swung back. A young female in flannel pajamas, kimono and slippers gave us the casual up-and-down. Her cheeks were glistening with cold cream, and the towel on her head informed us that we had intruded on her week-end beauty chores.

"They're out," she announced without breaking the

masticatory rhythm on her wad of gum.

"So it seems," I admitted. "You know where they are?"

She stared at me, not quite so casual. The little woman said: "We're friends of theirs. From out of town."

"Well, you just missed 'em. They've gone to a party someplace." There was a hint of envy in her briskness. "Wanna leave a note?"

"No, thanks," I said. "We'll phone them later. Did you talk to both of them?"

She chewed her gum and seemed to think it over, then she shrugged and slammed the door shut in our faces. Suzy caught her breath, indignantly. I laughed at her and tried the knob on 15B, just for good measure. The door was locked, of course. It had the kind of lock a high school boy could have taken with a strip of celloid, but in the State of California they pull your license if you use a burglar's tool.

My watch said half past six; the bacon aroma had become insistent. "What's for chow?" I asked.

"You're always thinking of your stomach," said the little woman, coldly. "It's too early for your treatment filling anyway. Let's find Jean Hendrix first."

"The nice lady said she's at a party someplace."

"Oh, Johnny, honestly! You know as well as I do that that nosy hag just caught a glimpse of the O'Neal girl going out and wearing a long dress."

"Suppose that's true, how do you figure we can play this hand? We've got no leads to work on, not without the roommate's story."

"How about the Nichols boy?"

"She ditched him, honey bun," I reminded her patiently. "He'd be the last one who..."

"I'm not so sure of that."

We were back at the car by that time and stood bucking the wind and the rain on the sidewalk, glaring at each other in an amiable sort of way. "If you insist," I said. "But we don't even have his address. We don't know anything about the guy, except that he's part of the Hollywood crowd. Which means he's not exactly likely to be easily available."

"John Marshall, if you're going to pretend you don't know your own business, so help me, I'll just handle this myself!"

I chuckled, more in resignation than because I was amused, and bundled her into the car. There was a drugstore on the corner, less than fifty yards away, too close to bother driving up to and looking for another parking spot. I strode on over to it, locked myself into a phone booth and dug up a dozen nickels for the hungry slot. I had a feeling this was not my lucky day.

The dentist's office didn't answer, and his residence in Beverly produced only their maid, who supplied the intelligence that the family was dining out, sir. No sir, I don't rightly know where they went to. The Information operator proudly claimed a list of forty-seven people named B. Nichols, all the way from San Fernando to Long Beach. The editorial department of the *Post-Courier* informed me that Sam Levy had stepped out a minute; was there anybody else who could take care of me? I said I didn't think so, and hung up, and finally caught Sam down at the Pilots' Cockpit on La Cienega. He groaned for me as if I'd slipped a knife between his ribs. "Oh no! Not you again!"

"Yeah, me. Relax, my friend, all I want out of you is a simple address. Some character by name of Barton Nich-

ols, said to be a famous artist. Give.”

He thought it over. “What’s the pitch?” he asked me, casually, like a ferret with too many rabbit holes to watch.

“A very serious case,” I said. “We’ve got him cold on charges of sedition, parricide, misprision, barratry and driving a cement mixer without a license. All we need now is to find out where he lives.”

“My mother told me it’d be like this,” he wailed. “Lay off that newspaper job, son, she told me, all you’ll ever be is just a hustler for the shysters, the cheap politicians and the private schnooks. And to think I could of been a big shot in the garment trade, like my old man!” He blew a raspberry and dropped the wail down to a confidential whisper. “Sure you haven’t got something for me? Like half a column on page two, with maybe sex in it already, little cheesecake pitcha we can print with it?”

“Not this time, Sam,” I said regretfully.

“Aah, what the hell. One more free ride,” he granted me. “Just when I’m sitting pretty with a hundred aces in the mitt. Okay, I make your boy—a real cutie, big thin drink of hooch, been here a couple years, came out from Maine or some damn place back East. A funny thing, the guy can really paint, been doing it since he got outta diapers, you know, a *wunderkind*. He’ll show you medals they awarded him from maybe twenty years ago, when he was eight years old. Nobody heard of him until he meets Mark Archer on the lot at RKO, and Mark gets him to paint his mother’s pitcha, strictly for a gag. So now he scores ten G’s, any time they can talk him into picking up a brush.”

“Well, that’s all right,” I said. “We’re all of us laboring in the same vineyard. Where’s his shack, Sam, do

you know?"

"Somewheres out west, down by the ocean. Sunset Palisades." He yelled off-mike at background voices urging him to hurry up. "Listen, these characters are waiting for me, I should skin 'em quick. You wouldn't think of holding out a story on your uncle Sammy, would you, hot shot?"

I made the proper horrified disclaimer and he took the hooks off me and went back to his pinochle game. The West Los Angeles directory supplied no Nicholises in Sunset Palisades. I hadn't thought it would; the movie crowd knows better than to list its numbers in this town. I shrugged it off, picked up my change and left the booth.

There was a taxi stand outside the drugstore, right across the boulevard. A single cab had pulled into the zone, and the driver was out on the sidewalk, talking on his yellow phone to the dispatcher. I ducked through traffic, intercepting him just as he started up again. He waved me off, good-naturedly impatient. "Sorry, Mac. I got a call."

"Hold it a sec. Were you around the last half hour?"

"You kidding, Mac? We keep 'em rolling in this weather. What's the beef?"

"No beef. I'm looking for some friends of mine. Just wondered if they caught a cab from here."

He stared at me and let his clutch in with a bang. A bright young high-school kid in jeans and surplus Navy jacket had been lapping up this sparkling dialogue as if he had a front seat at the Follies.

"Paper, Mister?"

I bought the *Mirror*, just to be polite, and saw him eyeing my supply of nickels with a more than customary

interest. "What's on your mind, son? Something else to sell?"

His grin was full of freckles and self-consciousness. "Mister, are you a cop?"

"Uh-uh, not me."

"I figured . . ." he began, then blurted out: "You look-in' for a girl?"

"That could be it. From up across the street."

"She got a cab." He nodded vigorously. "Bought a paper, too. 'Bout half an hour ago. Boy, is she stacked!" His lips were puckered for a whistle, but it visibly occurred to him discretion couldn't spoil the market. "Crescent Terrace," he informed me. "Cabbie had to check with the dispatcher. Sure you ain't a cop?"

I punched him lightly on the chin and dropped my handful of remaining nickels in his canvas pouch. I didn't have to check with the dispatcher. Crescent Terrace is in Sunset Palisades.

The minute we walked in on Barton Nichols's party my defective molar started acting up.

It began with a couple of jabs, as if someone were probing with a red-hot pin. From there on in, it settled to a plain old nagging toothache, flaring up occasionally to a shooting pain that reached my ear, then cooling down again. I swore at it under my breath and blamed it on the fog: the ocean grumbled restlessly across the rocks, about a hundred feet below the bluff, but it was not in sight. Out here, there was no rain, and the breeze had been conquered by the Canyon's towering defile, but a viscous white haze had squelched the Packard's headlights ever since we hit the coastal highway.

Up the hillside, where the road switched back between

one building lot after another, bulldozed into slopes of decomposing granite, hung the heavy tang of sagebrush, Digger pine and salt-wet air. The party wasn't hard to find. They'd thought of everything, including arc lights on the parking lot, a guard in uniform to look you over at the gate, and music from a little rumba combo pouring out into the chilly night. We passed the guard just by ignoring him and slid the car into a space between two foreign limousines.

The studio perched on the rim of the cliff and faced the ocean, turning its back on the road. Late-blooming blue lantana rioted along its glass-brick walls; a single pink hibiscus did its best to undermine the porch. The place was as big as a milking barn, and just about as bare inside. There was a vast expanse of parquet floor, a model stage covered with pillows, and a bamboo bar that occupied one corner; next to it, three white-smocked Filipinos slaved behind a serving table with a cold buffet. The orchestra and sixty guests or so filled up the rest of it. They couldn't use another stick of furniture in there, unless you counted the two paintings on the wall: one life-size back view of a buxom nude, one formal portrait of an orchidaceous young blonde.

We stood in the doorway, surveying this rat race and trying to acclimatize our lungs to the heat and the smoke and the redolence generated by the crowd. Nobody seemed to mind—street clothes, wet overcoats and all, we made an excellent impersonation of the Couple that was Not There. Two sleek young men in scarlet cummerbunds bumped into us, passed on without a glance. "So I told Zanuck he could go and jump in the Pacific," one of them said angrily.

The little woman nudged me, nodded at the portrait

and said: "Johnny, isn't that . . ."

"... previewed last night," another voice boomed on our left, sonorously. "At the Coliseum. My God, the cast was bigger than the audience! We try to buck TV, we should try bucking City Hall!" A burst of laughter from around the model stage drowned out the speaker and the music; on the stage, a fat old lady in a coat of paint, a rope of pearls and some three hundred dollars' worth of black chiffon had raised her skirts way up to here and was displaying a remarkably well-favored pair of legs. Both knees had been made up with lipstick and with eyebrow pencil to resemble Greta Garbo's face.

A heavy hand descended on my shoulder, and the rich big booming actor's voice said: "Well, surprise! How are ya, hawkshaw? Glad you made the show. . . ."

I grabbed the hand and shook it; Suzy skipped conventionalities and fell around his neck. I didn't blame her there—it isn't every day a girl can kiss a famous movie star. He had picked up a little padding in the waist since we'd taken a couple of blackmailers off his back, three years before.* But what it took to make the ladies go all over shivery, he still had it: the golden lion's mane, the classic brow, the profile like a bird of prey.

In Hollywood, when they've been drawing down five grand a week for twenty years, and they remember you at all, you've seen a miracle. Richard Cross was that very rare animal in these parts, an all-around good guy. I gave him back his hand and asked him what was going on.

The look he passed me was a little funny. Suzy kicked me in the shins and said: "Darling, the *picture!* Don't you recognize it?"

*See *Death Commits Bigamy* by James M. Fox.

From the buffet table crowd a slender blonde in platinum lamé came running over to us, brandishing a chicken wing. "Johnny! Suzanne!" This time I got my share of kisses, flavored with *pâté de foie gras* and Chanel Number Five. Somebody pushed a drink at me; somebody else instructed me to catch up quick. The drink had a wallop that knocked my tooth out cold. It was a Missionary's Downfall, which is what they call a fiendish blend of rum and crushed gardenia blossoms. Somebody informed me that our host was personally tending to its manufacture, in a Bendix washer hidden by the bar.

I had it figured out by then, about this clambake being in aid of the portrait on the wall. They dragged us over to it, and we made the proper noises, and the blonde, who was the third Mrs. Richard Cross, pretended to be hurt with me, because I hadn't seen the likeness right away. She had a point—the portrait was a pretty solid job. It did look like her, and it had a certain slick finesse, an almost photographic daintiness of color and detail.

She dragged the little woman off towards the powder room. Her formidable husband marched me past the crap game in the northeast corner to the master bedroom, on a corridor behind the orchestra.

"This ought to do, for privacy," he offered cheerfully.

"Oh, do we need some? Sorry, but you're not my type."

He didn't even bother grinning. "Bombs away," he ordered me. "You had me fooled there for a minute, hawkshaw, but you dropped the ball. What brings you here?"

The bedroom was nice, if a trifle severe in its forest

green whipcord and bleached walnut scheme. It had been requisitioned by the stag department for a *vestiaire*. I sat down on the king-size bed among the jumble of vicuña overcoats and Borsalino hats, and gave myself a cigarette, and looked at Richard Cross with something of a wary eye. He wasn't nervous or upset with me, but our appearance on the scene meant just one thing to him, since it had proved itself to be an uninvited one.

"It's not your studio, Dick," I said. "It isn't Leslie, and it isn't you. You can exhale now and stop shoving me."

His chuckle was a mixture of amusement and relief. I didn't blame him there—big trees expect to catch a lot of wind.

"Good deal," he told me heartily. "Another rhubarb like that last one would be out of line just now. We're releasing *Knight Errant* for Christmas, and the sneak last night didn't register much." He saw where I was looking and supplied a whistle. "Whee! So that's the ticket, is it?"

On the bedroom wall behind him hung a portrait of Jean Hendrix in a modern black-and-silver frame. It was the only painting in the room, and on this one the artist wasn't kidding or trying to promote a buck. She'd been posed in a Spanish mantilla of fine black lace against a background of cool green chartreuse, the russet flame of her hair tamed by two high Castilian combs. A double collar of large pearls glowed on her pretty throat and matched the pear-shaped hangers on her tiny ears. The brush had dwelled amorously and with almost incredible detail on the kissable pout of her lips, on the delicate sculpture of her nose, on the classical arch of both eyebrows that seemed raised a little, as if emphasis

were needed to the subtle interplay of doubt and question in her clear blue eyes.

"The guy can paint," I said. "He did all right with Leslie, but this picture really sends me."

"That's his fiancée."

"I know. She is also my favorite dental nurse." I saw him get the pitch and added, "How did you find out about this, Dick?"

"Good heavens, man, he's broadcast it to everybody here, about her ditching him last night," he boomed at me. "Bart isn't exactly the soul of discretion, and he's been taking it badly enough. The gal was movie-struck, and she broke off with him because he wouldn't play. He blocked a test for her at MGM last week, I hear, and he was right. The kid has no experience at all, and if she did, God forgive me for mentioning it, who else but me wants to be married to an actress in this town?"

"What I'm supposed to figure out is why she ran away."

"I heard about that, too," he said. "Must be her boss who roped you in."

"That could be it."

He gave me a dose of the cultured-vulture profile. "What's in it for you?"

"Not very much."

"If I know dentists . . ." he began, and shrugged his beautifully padded shoulders in the kind of dinner jacket that took ten years off his age. "Now listen, John, let's understand each other. You'll think I'm putting in the fix, because of Leslie's portrait and the bad publicity for us if there's a leak on this—you know how those reporters are, they'd screw it up to where the Hendrix girl ran out on Bart when she found he was carrying on with my

wife, or something just as stupid, anything to tie us into it. As a matter of fact, I don't give a damn about that, and I know Leslie wouldn't either. We've never even met the kid, but Bart's a nice boy, and he's gone all to pieces about her checking out on him. So I'd suggest you go ahead and pick her up, and see what you can do on straightening them out. Forget about your Painless Parker—just bill me for your expenses and a reasonable fee."

"That's very handsome of you, Dick," I said. "But with a bit of luck we may not need to trouble you. Miss Hendrix's roommate is among your guests, and if I talk to her she'll likely be able to give us a lead. Maybe we'll sort this out tonight."

He put a furrow in the classic brow and nodded. "Yes, of course. Bart introduced her. Charming lass, a bit effusive, possibly. If you'll stay here, I'll go and bring her in."

There was a lengthy pause after he'd left. I smoked another butt, and paced the room, and kept my hand in peeking behind doors. The bathroom was very severe, in black and white, just the thing for a man who had to work with colors all the time. The wardrobe closet bulged with everything, from old blue denims to a morning coat, and breathed a loudish scent of Russian leather. The last remaining door revealed a little dark-room, tiled and neatly kept, professionally equipped, reminding me that artists often double in photography. One of the Filipino boys came in while I was prowling and afforded me a slightly sinister conspiratorial smirk. He bore a tray of Missionary Downfalls, fresh from the laundromat. It was my night to take liquids for dinner all right.

Dick Cross returned at last. He stuck his head inside, and winked at me, and pulled it back again. The rumba

band was going strong behind him, but his stage whisper easily drowned out the maracas.

"He's waiting for you, honey. Go ahead, he doesn't bite. . . ."

The girl who came in didn't look to be scared. She was a tall brunette, the vivid Irish type of beauty which depends on animation rather than on perfect symmetry. Her mouth was too large, but its strawberry red seemed a natural tone; her nose was too small, but its flare was seductive, the tilt like a badge of good cheer. Her eyes were too wide, but their warm hazel sparkled with a candid, almost childish curiosity. She wore the kind of dinner gown a working girl would choose, because it would last for a while and match her regular accessories: black taffeta, not too demure, not too extreme, a size sixteen that might have been let out a bit to fit curves not entirely foreseen by the pattern designer—pleasing curves, as if by way of extra dividend. The newsboy's quick approval had been justified. This young lady was stacked, in the sense that you'd like your own sister to be, a healthy, altogether admirable body and a winsome face.

"I'm Kathy O'Neal," she told me breathlessly.

Her hand was small, well manicured, the nails cut short, untinted, buffed to a high gloss. It gripped mine with an unexpected cordiality and strength. She was so obviously bursting with her eagerness to help that I had trouble keeping the leash on my grin.

"I've been asked to find Jean, Miss O'Neal," I said.

"Oh yes. I wish you would!" She nearly grabbed my hand again, as if physical contact was needed to show me how much she approved. "I've been so *worried* . . . I . . . that is . . ." She accepted the bedside chair and bit

her lips for me, not nervously but from simple excitement about it all.

"You have any idea where she is?" I inquired. "If you do, or even if it's just a guess, you'd better tell me now. We don't want her to lose her job."

"No. Oh, no! If I knew . . ." The hazel eyes were almost pleading with me, she was trying so hard to get organized. "You see, Jean hasn't ever done a thing like that before. I just can't *understand* . . ."

"How long have you two roomed together?"

"Oh, at least three years!" She frowned at me, trying to figure it out. "It was three last July, I believe. She came to live with me after her parents died, while she was still in dental college. That's when I was on my own first job, at Cohn & Rolph, downtown, and we were always broke—you see, her dad's estate was in a mess, and she'd no other relatives except some half-baked cousins up in Minneapolis who didn't *bother*—well, you know, we had been friends at USC and always got along. Then the year after that, when she had her diploma, right away she went to work for Dr. Wittels, and we were all right for money—I got in with Federated Industries, and everything was lovely then, except . . ." She hesitated, and the hazel eyes lost something of their sparkle.

"Don't worry, Miss O'Neal," I said. "I'm used to this, and I'll respect your confidence."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you will. Mr. Cross told me all about you. . . . Isn't he nice? It's just that Jean has been so anxious about getting into pictures all these years. She's had a lot of disappointments, and they used to make her horribly depressed—you know, she *really* is much prettier than all these girls who seem to get the

breaks. And she'd been popular in high-school drama class, and won so many prizes, and been voted the most likely to succeed in Hollywood. . . ."

The painting on the wall smiled down at us, a trifle archly, as if it considered these words faint praise. "You think that's why she dropped her option on Bart Nichols?" I inquired. "Because he wouldn't help?"

"I don't know, Mr. Marshall. I really don't. Bart seems to think so, but Jean wouldn't tell me anything last night. I wondered if . . ." She blushed and rearranged her skirts; the hazel eyes avoided me. "There was another man," she blurted out, almost theatrically.

"Oh, I see."

"No. Oh, no. I didn't mean . . . It's just she used to go with Ray when we were both in college, and he sort of disappeared, and then last summer he turned up again. Only Jean wasn't interested in him any more, and she refused to date him, and he made a lot of trouble, calling on the phone, and writing notes to her, and waiting for her on the street. I thought perhaps . . ."

"Was he on deck last night?"

"Well, yes, but . . . Oh, it's all so terribly *involved*!"

"Let's try this way," I said. "You tell me just exactly what occurred, from the time you came home and found Jean until she left. Then maybe we can get this straightened out."

"But I got home before she did!" Her fresh young voice sounded mildly surprised with me. "It was past six when she came in, and of course she was very upset and in an awful rush. . . ."

"Her boss told me he let her off a little early," I protested. "That would mean she got away by five o'clock, and it's only a ten-minute drive."

"I know. But she'd had trouble with her car again. It wouldn't start, and at the service station they took such a lot of time to fix it. So you see, her being in a hurry didn't seem peculiar to me, because the day before she'd told me that she had a dinner date with Bart. Jean's terribly *conscientious* about her men. She feels it isn't right to make them wait, when they're supposed to pay the check and everything."

"Very commendable," I said. My tooth was acting up again, and it affected what I had been using for a sense of humor. "Now, we've got that straight: you were at home, and Jean arrived past six. She told you she was late, because her car was out of order, and she seemed upset. Where does this fellow Ray come in?"

"That must've been ten minutes later," she assured me breathlessly. "While Jean was in her bath. He knocked on our door, and I asked who it was, and wouldn't let him in, of course, only he said he had to see her, if I didn't open up he'd break the lock. I knew he would, and make a scene, and bring the neighbors down on us, and . . . well, you know . . . He'd had too much to drink, but I managed to make him behave, once he was in the living room. Then I went back and talked to Jean, and she refused to see him, so at last he went away."

"Know where he lives?"

"Somewhere around West Hollywood. His name's Ray Summerhill. He works for Technicolor, in the lab. Oh, but he *wouldn't* . . . would he?"

"That," I said, "we'll have to check. Does Mr. Nichols know about him?"

"No. Oh no!" The notion didn't much appeal to her. "You mustn't tell him," she admonished me.

I grinned and reached to pat her knee, by way of reassurance, and the little woman walked in through the door as if on cue. The smile she gave us was as bright as a new silver penny, and about as unalloyed.

"Watch him, Kathy," she counseled. "The man likes his work. He's been known to get carried away, if you see what I mean."

"Women!" I said, and switched my grin. "You two have met?"

"Your host performed the introductions," she instructed me, turning aside.

The lanky giant at her heels seemed to be quite a bit the worse for wear. He stood up well enough, topping my own six feet by anyway eight inches, and his dinner jacket was a beautifully fitted midnight blue, his shirt a spotless nylon custom-built. But the eyes behind tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses looked like bruises on the day after a nasty brawl, the black mustache drooped soggly over a sullen mouth, the long black hair had lost its waviness and had been rumped into wild disorder by his big and strangely clumsy hands restlessly prowling through it while they fatuously tried to smooth it down.

He gazed down at me from the clouds as if it really might be cold up there, inspecting me the way a patient will inspect a dose of bitter medicine. "So you're a private eye," he said. His voice was pretty good, a pleasant, cultured baritone, a little light for that much man, his diction ultra-careful, almost mincing, the way people talk when they know they are boiled to the gills.

I shot a frown at Suzy. "Who's a private eye?" I asked him, cheerfully. "Somebody's kidding you, my friend. We're on the staff of *Movie Magazine*, and we dropped by to see the picture."

That went over with him like a house afire. "Don't want you here," he told me. "You're a private eye. Don't want you bothering my guests. I like your wife, but I don't want you here. Don't want you prying in my bushiness." He winced and glowered at me, then said "business" again, slowly and sharply, correcting himself as if it mattered to him to create the right impression.

"So okay," I said. "You don't want this, you don't want that. What do you want, my friend? Not that it makes a bit of difference to us, but we'd just like to know. If it should happen to be Jean, maybe we'll see if we can fix you up."

He stared right past me at the painting on the wall, and it looked back at him, half smiling, doubtfully expectant, questioning. "That's Jean," he said, and bowed, with all the ceremony of a chamberlain who has announced Her Majesty. "This man's a private eye," he told the painting, solemnly.

Kathy O'Neal said nervously: "Oh, Bart . . ." and started fumbling for a handkerchief.

He turned to us and drew himself up with a monumental dignity. "She never wanted me," he said. "She fooled me so I thought she did, but all she wanted was to be a movie star, and when the chips were down she dropped me cold. Now I don't want her any more."

"Suppose you tell us where she is," I needled him.

His scowl came back on duty and he reached for me with one uncertain hand and grabbed my shoulder, spinning me towards the door. I didn't blame him, but there was no sense in arguing or letting him get by with it. I ducked out of his grip, slid a foot past his ankle and feinted a blow at his nose. He staggered, tripped, collapsed into the easy chair the little woman had pulled

up behind him and immediately fell asleep, legs scissored out, glasses askew, the sullen mouth wide open and emitting tiny, rasping snores.

"Nice going, cherry pie," I said without approval.

"I couldn't handle him," said Suzy, meekly. "Darling, he was such a pest, and I felt sorry for him, so it seemed the only way."

"How did he find out about us? Dick Cross knows better than to tell him."

The O'Neal girl stared at us; her generous strawberry mouth made an O of dismay. "It was me," she confessed. "Mr. Cross didn't warn me, and Bart interrupted us while we were talking about you."

"That's all right," I said. "As long as he's not in condition to bring down the roof. Now then, young lady, how about the rest of it? You mentioned Jean was in her bath, this fellow Ray turned up, she wouldn't see him and you made him leave. And what happened after that?"

"I don't *remember*," she complained. "That is, I do, of course, but it seemed awfully confusing at the time, and I still can't make out why Jean acted so *odd*. I went back to the bedroom, and there she was dressing, putting on her old gray suit, the one she kept for traveling on week ends or on holidays. And she'd dug out a bag, and was throwing in stuff just as fast as she could. So I asked her if she and Bart . . . well, you know . . . and she laughed in the funniest way, and said no, the engagement was off, she had sent him a wire that afternoon. I thought she was kidding, because after all, who'd do a silly thing like that, and she does have the queerest sense of humor on occasion, and I noticed she still wore his ring, but when she saw me gawk at it she took it off, and

gave it to me, and she told me to return it—well, you can imagine, I was simply horrified! I made a beeline for the phone, and called up Bart, and tried to make him *talk* to her. But he'd already got the wire, and he was drinking, there was nothing I could do with him, and Jean paid no attention—she was laughing all the time as if it were a great big joke, and then she took her bag and left without another *word*! I tried to stop her, but she shook me off and just *ran* for her car!”

“What kind of car is it?” I asked.

“Oh, it's an awful wreck. I never rode in it with her if I could help it, there was always something wrong with it. Her dad gave it to her for high-school graduation, and it was already pretty old. A black Plymouth coupé.”

“You know the license number?”

“No, I don't.” She thought about it hard. “There were a lot of fives in it. I could find the papers for it, if she left them in her desk.”

“Don't let him impose on you, honey,” said the little woman. “He can get it from the Auto Club.”

I scowled at her. “You did return the ring?”

She shook her chocolate-brown permanent, emphatically. “No, it's still at home. I offered Bart I'd bring it, but he didn't want it back.”

“What did the telegram say? Did you read it?”

“Well . . .” she began, and looked at us uneasily, then glanced at Bart, still slumped in his chair and snoring fitfully. “I read it,” she confessed, and blushed. “He showed it to me, earlier this evening.”

“See if he has it on him, will you, sugar lamb?” I asked the little woman who was sitting near him, on a settee.

She came across it in the right-hand pocket of his coat, the first one she tried. He'd crumpled the yellow Western Union flimsy to a wad that probably had been smoothed out and read and crumpled back a dozen times. I smoothed it out again and studied it—it said LA22 447P BARTON F. NICHOLS 16 CRESCENT TERRACE SUNSET PALISADES CALIF—BART DARLING DONT BE MAD THERES JUST NO SENSE TO US YOU WILL BE HAPPIER WITHOUT ME ALL MY LOVE JEAN—. The stamp of the receiving office was a little blurred by this time, but I could still make out SM NOV 22 PM 506.

"They can never resist playing up to the gallery," I said. "The big renunciation scene."

Kathy O'Neal watched me, wide-eyed, as if I were talking in riddles. Suzy smiled, for both of us. "Women!" she mimicked me, indulgently.

"Yeah, women. Do you think a man could be that insincere?"

"Oh, pooh on you. She was just trying to be kind to him, that's all."

I pursed my lips. The lucky recipient of this particular piece of female kindness stirred in his chair, quit snoring and fretfully brushed at the hair in his eyes. He fumbled through his pockets and came up with half a dozen pills, an assortment of sizes and colors—little white pills, larger yellow pills, red gelatin capsules and even a bottle-green screw-top affair as big as a finger lid. He dumped the whole collection in his mouth and swallowed effortlessly, without relish but with evident familiarity. He promptly subsided again without paying attention to us. It was such a peculiar move I almost tried to stop him. "What's he up to now?"

"They looked like vitamins," the little woman said.

"Bart eats them all the time," said the O'Neal girl. "Just like candy. He's been doing it for years. He says that anyone who wants to be successful as an artist needs . . . oh, I don't know. Some funny Latin word that sounds like vitamin."

"*Vis vitae*," I told her. "The force of life. It's a swell theory, if you can make it work." I put the telegram back on the bed. "That all there was to it? She sent this wire, and packed a bag, and never mentioned what she had in mind?"

The little woman said: "She hasn't phoned you since, or left a message either?"

"No. Oh no!"

"Maybe she tried," I said. "Did you stay home yourself, last night, or did you have a date?"

"Well, not exactly. I . . . that is, I didn't have a date. When Jean had gone, I cooked some supper for myself and walked around the block to see a picture show. One of those corny Broadway musicals, but after that I felt a little less confused. . . . You *really* think she might've tried to call me, Mr. Marshall?"

The notion seemed to fluster her. This time I got to pat her knee. "It's barely possible," I said. "If she was in a jam, and could get to a phone. It doesn't look that way to me. I guess that's all we need from you for now, my dear."

The little woman coughed; I knew it wasn't cattiness and glanced aside. Bart Nichols hadn't moved, but he was watching us intently through the bloodshot glaze that covered his eyes like a film. His black mustache had straightened out and quivered steadily, as if it had life of its own. I shrugged him off, there was so obviously nothing we could do with him, and held the door to

where the ladies could file out.

In the big studio the party was still going good. The fat old gal with Garbo on her knees had grabbed a pair of castanets and joined the rumba band. The crap game in the corner made a noise like a machine-gun nest; behind the bar, the cocktail Bendix paddled merrily away. Leslie Cross saw us trying to navigate the floor and steered her partner on an intercepting course. "Why, darlings, you're not leaving yet?" she gaily trilled for us, and whispered in my ear: "Dick's waiting for you on the porch."

The cowboy star who had his arm around her glared at me with mock ferocity. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "What's this wolf got that I haven't got?"

"He doesn't belong in a sandwich, sweetie," she informed him gleefully and danced him off towards the bar.

Outside the fog was closing in, its clammy tendrils writhing up along the cliff and reaching for the house, only to be rebuffed by the light and the heat streaming out from the hall. At the far end of the piazza showed the yellow pin-point gleam of a burning cigar above the faint reflection of a starched white shirt. The booming voice was muffled. "How'd it go?"

"Miss O'Neal hasn't given us much to work on, Dick," I said. "But we'll go see what can be done. It sounds like Miss Hendrix made plans in advance and knew where she was going, but this town is not much good for girls with big ideas."

"It's poison," he agreed. "We talk about this Cinderella problem all the time, and don't do anything about it. All the money, the glamour publicity, stacked in a heap, within the space of a few city blocks, while

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none of 'em except the lucky ones can get a crack at it—okay, so it's one of those things, and I'm stuck for a piece of it. Now, listen, John, one of Louella's spies is here, and she's already spotted us together. I don't mind, but I'd suggest you play it quick, before she beats you to the draw."

"We're on our way," I promised him. "It shouldn't be much of a job."

My treatment filling stabbed me in the ear. I grimaced and rejoined the ladies who'd been watching us from just inside the hall. The little woman dug an elbow into me and pointed with her chin. Across the studio, Bart Nichols leaned against the wall under his painting of the back-view nude. He brought one hand up from a pocket, glanced at it and clapped it to his mouth. The sleek young man who'd offered Zanuck a November plunge into the ocean stood beside him, studying the picture, molding its vigorous curves in the air with his arms.

3

THE DOG WOKE UP the moment I turned off Doheny Drive.

Clinging precariously to the foothills just below the County Strip, the Palm Grove district occupies some twenty blocks of real estate in mild distress. Some of its narrow little streets are lined with rows of stucco workman's cottages, the weathered pastel box variety of the depression years. Downhill, a lumber yard, a dozen clapboard stores and half a dozen two-man factories clog up the landscape in a catch-as-catch-can zoning scheme. In between there are patches of brush and weeds, and potholed gravel alleys where the sheriff's prowler car noses in at irregular hours of the night behind its spotlight beam, with engine idling and the radio tuned down.

The phone book, at a filling station on the boulevard, had said *1330-¾ North Wellington*. It was an easy place to find, if you knew where to look for it. The street ran all of fifty yards, dead-end uphill; the house had it all to itself, a big old Gothic yellow brick that stood in splendid isolation between empty lots. A shabby hot-rod Ford, a muddy jeep and one black Chevrolet sedan of fairly recent vintage leaned against the curb; the absence of a driveway indicated no garage. This seemed to be another of those aged white elephants turned into bachelor apartments under OPA and left to fall apart. I drove on past and backed around inside the cul-de-sac

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and shoved the Packard in behind the jeep. The dog was wide awake by then and whining at the open window, ears pricked up alert.

“Better sit this one out,” I told the little woman, doubtfully.

“Why, Johnny?”

“I don’t know. No special reason. I’ve just got a feeling.”

She laughed at me, indulgently, and hit the pavement on her side. Khan promptly scrambled out before she had a chance to slam the door on him and trotted over to the nearest pepper tree. He sniffed at it disdainfully, addressed it briefly and came loping after us across the front lawn’s spongy devil grass that hadn’t seen a mower for six weeks.

The front porch tilted drunkenly and sagged under a load of scabrous rust-brown ivy, strong enough to support a platoon of Marines, and thick enough to shelter every black widow spider in Los Angeles. My pencil flashlight found a single mailbox and two numbers, 1330-1330¼. My knuckles on the heavy oaken door found no response inside.

Down here the fog was less opaque, the atmosphere a little chillier. Suzy pulled up the collar of her furs. “Let’s try around in back?”

I grunted and strode ahead, skirting the tangled china-berry hedge that marked a footpath to the rear. The back yard boasted the inevitable incinerator, four big garbage cans filled to the brim, and one bedraggled yellow alley cat which Khan chased quietly up into the grapefruit tree. The kitchen porch had been bricked in and split in two, with doors on either side of fresh raw redwood lumber, slotted for the mails and numbered in

a coarse black stencil. Number 1330-¾ figured on the southern half and showed a chink of light; my pencil flash touched on a smudged white card, thumbtacked above the letter slot. The card said in a careless pencil scrawl *Mr. Raymond P. Summerhill*.

The windows were narrow, and high in the wall, shut tight and closely masked behind Venetian blinds. My ear against the door chink failed to catch a sound. I shrugged and knocked and waited, knocked again and listened, shrugged again and knocked some more. The dog came trotting from the grapefruit tree and sniffed at the door, inquisitively. Suzy pinched my arm and listened with me. "Darling, if he's out, why did he leave the light?"

"Some people do. Especially when they don't pay the bill."

She glanced up at the windows. "Maybe I can get a peek. . . ."

I smiled, a trifle grimly, picked her up and boosted her aloft, and got my face full of her Persian lamb. The window gave a tiny squeal; the blinds produced a bone-yard rattle. Nothing happened for the longest time. I tried to recollect how many years had passed since I'd participated in this kind of exercise. The last occasion had been back in '42, during my Army days, when I was casing dockyard saboteurs in a hotel in Baltimore. Doc Wittels was missing the fun, but he was getting value for his money.

The little woman wriggled in my arms and dropped back to the porch. Her whisper came a bit unevenly. "I'm not quite sure."

"You're not quite sure of what?"

". . . I think he ~~may~~ be dead."

“Oh, fine,” I said. “That’s all we need, a missing girl, a toothache, and a dead man on an empty stomach. What’s the pitch?”

“He’s lying on the bed. He . . . there’s no blood or anything, but it just looks as if . . .”

I sniffed, and put my flashlight on the lock, and sighed, and groped around inside my wallet. The strip of celluloid slid past the door jamb, caught the lock face, pushed the tongue aside. The door swung open easily, without a sound. There was plenty of light, from an old-fashioned ceiling fixture and from the cheap dime-store bridge lamp in the corner by the couch. The room was obviously former servants’ quarters, small and square, haphazardly redecorated in a garish modern henna brown and white. It was a curiously empty room: two chairs, a coffee table and a smaller table with a television set made up the furniture. The gas fire in the dummy fireplace was turned off, and it was colder in there than a butcher’s storage locker. A pile of magazines, some dirty dishes and two empty quarts of gin completed the inventory.

Sprawled on his face across the bedding on the couch reposed the body of a lad in dull gray flannel slacks and blue pajama jacket.

His legs were dangling to the floor, one foot still shod, the other bare, its scuffed brown loafer sandal flung aside. A shock of straw-blond hair showed on the pillow, but the rest of it was plastered back and partly hidden by his arms. There were cigarette ashes all over the bed, and a couple of butts had scorched the carpet’s brown frieze. The place reeked of stale smoke, stale gin and human misery.

The dog edged in ahead of us, ignored the man and

flopped before the fireplace, sank his massive yellow head between his paws and watched us from one languid amber eye. I crossed the rug in four reluctant strides and laid a finger on the man; his neck was hard and warm, the pulse beat slow but steady in his jugular. I shook his shoulders, pulled his hair and punched him in the back. I went into the bathroom, drenched a towel in cold water, slapped the bottom of his naked foot with it. That did the trick.

He shuddered and jerked in his leg, and pivoted over on the couch in one convulsive moment, then sat up and glared at us, uncertain of himself but wide-awake. He was a pretty boy, still in his early twenties, features tanned and cleanly cut, the V-shaped type of face that hardly ever misses being handsome without showing weakness, whether it belongs to gentleman or movie star or crook. He saw me first and didn't like me, missed the dog, and saw the little woman by the door. She wasn't smiling, but he liked her better. He started fumbling through his pockets for a cigarette and came up with an empty pack. I gave him one, and dropped the towel on the rug, and snapped my lighter into flame for him. He didn't like me anyway.

"How'd you get in?"

"Your name Ray Summerhill?"

"Who wants to know?"

We could have practiced questioning each other all night long. He was still boiled, and working up towards an argument. Suzy stepped in, decisively. "We're friends of Jean's," she said. "We want to talk with her."

He froze abruptly, then he shook his head, not negatively but as if to clear the fumes from it. I wondered if my comely russet dental nurse knew all about her

fatal power to drive men to drink, just by her absence. "Jean . . ." he muttered, almost absent-mindedly, then viciously dragged on his cigarette. "So what? How'd you get in?"

"Just tell us where she is," I said.

"Say, mister, who ya think you're . . . Wainnamminute," he broke in upon himself. "What's coming off here anyway? If you're a friend of hers . . ." He shook himself some more; he looked both angry and perplexed. That was all right; I'd seen that sort of look before. It very often doesn't mean a thing. I'd seen it on people who'd just swallowed the canary and who claimed they couldn't sing a note.

What bothered me was something else again. There have been many cases where young ladies ran away with their old college boy friends after much to-do of secrecy and silly nonsense all around. There've been a few in which the boys put up a show of cave-man tactics, going through some kind of a phony abduction routine. But in neither event is Handsome Harry likely to wind up making love to a bottle of gin by himself, that soon. Not unless something has gone very, very wrong.

"Okay, let's have it, fellow," I admonished him. "What have you done with her?"

"Ya mean to say she's not . . ."

"That's right, she's not. Quit stalling, youngster. Lay it on the line. Where is she now? When did you see her last?"

It sobered him, a little. "Lissen, mister, what's it to ya? What're you, a cop or something? Why'ncha go and ask this Nichols character she's going with?"

"I'm asking you."

"... Awright, you wanna know so bad, I saw her yes-

terday. Last night I saw her, 'cause I waited for her at the place she works. Jean's been my girl for years, that artist guy nicked her away from me, I gotta right to keep on trying, don' I, long as she ain't married to him yet?"

"Ex-con, aren't you, my boy?" I said.

He sat quite still, his scowl abruptly dead-pan. "Where'd you get that crazy notion, mister?" he inquired, in a voice that was suddenly tight and dangerous.

"If it's supposed to be a secret, youngster, watch your language. Don't use con talk such as 'nicked.' And don't be so surprised when girls get difficult with you after you've been in stir for two-three years."

He got his feet back under him and jumped at me. I caught him easily; one arm under the chin, one fist into the stomach took his wind away and flung him back onto the couch. The little woman sharply caught her breath; the dog arose majestically from the fireplace rug and braced himself, black muzzle flashing white and pink. The growl that issued from his belly seemed to shake the rafters.

"Hold, Khan honey, *hold!*"

The tawny Dane stood still, on quivering legs, the monstrous shoulder muscles gently rippling under his yellow skin. Suzy had grabbed his collar and was anxiously watching the boy, who glowered at us from the bed. "Please stay there, Mr. Summerhill," she told him carefully.

The front door got into the act, supplying us with three quick, timid knocks. A thin soprano voice spoke up behind it.

"Ray, are you there? May I come in?"

The boy on the bed lost all his color and dropped back into the pillows, limp with shock. I crossed the room

again, but fast, and opened the door with a flourish, and swallowed a gulp of surprise. The young lady who confronted me was not Jean Hendrix. She was not over five feet tall, and just as delicately shaped and chiseled as a Dresden doll, with flaxen twin braids hanging to her waist. She wore a frilly little-girl white blouse with blue silk ribbon bows, and over that a warm blue woolen pinafore. But her legs were like match sticks, solidly encased in orthopedic braces to the hips, and the crutches supporting her armpits were the most pathetic things I'd ever seen. She looked to be no more than twelve years old.

"Hello . . ." she said, and smiled at me self-consciously.

"Hello yourself," I said. "Isn't it past your bedtime, honey?"

Her big blue eyes were very serious on mine. "Uh-uh! I just got back from work. . . ."

"You did? What kind of work is that?"

"Darling, for Heaven's sake," the little woman said. "Why don't you let her in?"

I wrung a grin out of my lips. The child said gravely: "But I didn't know that Ray had company. . . ." She took a heavy, clumping step into the room and gave a tiny cry of sheer delight. "Oh, what a *pretty* dog!"

Khan relaxed and came gingerly stepping her way and collapsed at her feet. His tail swept the rug in a sinuous arc of ecstatic approval. I closed the door and Suzy told her: "We're the Marshalls, honey. We're just visiting with Ray."

"How do you do." Without the crutches she'd have curtsied to us; it was a formal, drawing-room acknowledgment. "I'm Betty-Lou. I'm on the radio."

My eyebrows went way up, but Suzy nodded at me,

both in warning and in confirmation. The boy on the couch had recovered his nerve and swung his feet back to the floor. "She lives across the street," he said. "She's learning to take pictures and I'm helping her. Something wrong with your camera, Betty-Lou?"

She held it out to him; it dangled from one wrist, a cheap small box-type Kodak on a leather strap. I hadn't even noticed it before. "The knob won't turn," she complained. "It's gone all icky somewhere inside. . . ."

He slipped it off her wrist and took her crutches, lifting her into a chair. His glance at us was half-defensive, half-ashamed. He put his second shoe on, took the camera into the bathroom, locked the door on us. That didn't worry me—there was no other exit, and I'd seen the darkroom stuff he kept in there. The child became absorbed in playing with the dog's stiffly erect yellow ears; Khan's grim yellow head was resting quietly in her lap, as if it never had belonged in any other place.

Ray Summerhill came back and handed her the camera. "My fault," he said. "I didn't put the spool in good this morning. Sorry, Betty-Lou."

She pointed at the dog. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Yeah, he sure is. It's all fixed up now, honey. Turns okay. Remember, hold your breath before you snap the shutter."

"Thank you, Ray. I will," she promised him, as if her life depended on it. From the doorstep she turned back to us. "Pleased to have met you," she assured us solemnly. The dog tugged at his collar where I held him and whined after her dejectedly.

The boy slumped in the chair she'd occupied, and met my eyes. Hostility had been drained out of him; he was as sober as the milkman. "You a dick?"

"I've told you what we are."

"... Okay, so I was in the big house for a couple years. My last year down at USC I got in with a bunch of guys that cribbed a liquor store. I only drove the heap, but a watchman gets hurt and so the judge, he throws the book at us. That doesn't signify I'd pull a snatch on Jean or anything like that."

"Who said she has been snatched?" I asked him pointedly.

He dropped his stare and bit his lip. "Listen, why pick on me? Jean knew plenty of guys she was feeding a line. All she ever cared about was money and a chance to get into the movies. Lots of 'em were offering her both, she told me so herself. That long-haired screwball she's engaged to knows what happened to her, if you wanna bet."

"You've met Bart Nichols?"

"Yeah, I've met the guy. I'll say I have. I got a job at Technicolor, understand, and he came down this summer working with me on a sequence in *Knight Errant* where they'd photographed one of his pictures, and the filter had been outta whack. We wash the red in just a little heavier and kind of smooth it over, but the studio, they want him to approve the negative. So we start talking, and you know this character's idea of what women should be like?"

I glanced at Suzy, who was watching us with tolerant amusement. "Most of us are pretty well agreed," I said. "But he might have something."

"Oh, yeah, he's got something. He figures they been shaped all wrong, they ought to make 'em with the bust in back, you follow me? He says the curves in front don't match. He'd like to paint 'em all that way, only he

knows it ain't commercial. Can you beat that for a screwball, mister?"

I rubbed my jaw, reflectively, and asked him: "When you spoke to Jean last night, what did she say?"

"She didn't," he confessed, his grin as rueful as they come.

"Just skip the high-school repartee," I said. "I am not interested in your unsuccessful courting, son, but you can do better than that. What time was it you talked with her?"

"Must've been five o'clock." He'd swallowed his resentment neat, without a chaser. "I'd been waiting for her in the lobby, where she works. Her car was in the lot, and I walked down with her. She wouldn't even listen to me. Told me she was in a hurry, that she had a date."

"She didn't mention who it was?"

"Mister, you don't know Jean. She makes it rough for you. I even had to fix that bum old crate of hers. She'd burned a coil, so I went out and got a new one for her, and I put it in, and then she just drove off without a word."

"How long'd it take you?"

"I dunno. I had to drive my car clear down to Pico, hunting for a service station with a spare. Maybe three-quarters of an hour."

"What does she drive?"

He blinked at me, a little apprehensively. "Black Plymouth coop," he said. "A '33. The worst they ever made, and it's in lousy shape. She sticks to it because her dad gave it to her, and he got killed, the day they rode me off to Quentin."

"Know the license number?"

He reeled it off for me. I wrote it down; it had a lot of fives in it, all right. "Why did you follow her to her apartment?" I inquired.

The question broke him like you crack a stick of kindling wood. His shoulders sagged; his clean-cut, hard young face went suddenly to pieces. He dashed out to the bathroom, without bothering to close the door this time. We heard him groaning in there, giving up the contents of his stomach, whimpering like any little boy who's lost a toy and needs his mother. Khan gazed after him with luminously brooding yellow eyes; Suzy came over to me, pinched my arm and looked up worriedly. "Darling, you think we ought to . . ."

"Let him sweat it out. He'll be okay."

I'd seen too often the effect of dry, impersonal persistent grilling on a suspect who is trying to put up a front. The trouble here was that we'd got the wrong reaction. Any man with problems big enough to drive him to the bottle can be cracked quite easily, but what comes out may not be just exactly what you're looking for. In this case I was sold on it, cash on the barrelhead, that Mr. Raymond Summerhill knew less about Jean Hendrix's disappearance than I did myself.

When he returned at last he flung himself down on the bed again and lay there, breathing shallowly, fists clenched with knuckles showing white. He was about to lose a shoe again; I noticed where it had a heel strap coming loose that wouldn't give him trouble when he walked with it but wouldn't hold the shoe while it was off the ground.

"What did you do last night after Jean's roommate kicked you out?" I asked him callously.

He didn't even flinch. "I bought some liquor and

came right on home. You don't believe me, go ask Betty-Lou—she and her mother saw me coming in. I been here ever since.”

“You didn't go to work today?”

“I phoned the lab and told 'em I was sick.”

It was that simple, if you took his word for it. He was a dead-end street himself, just like the one he lived on. “Fair enough,” I said. “But Jean's still missing, fellow. If she means that much to you, what are you gonna do about it?”

He lay there staring at us for a while. It was a dull and yet somehow defiant stare.

“Nothing, I guess,” he mumbled finally.

“That's what I thought. It seems to me like you've got company,” I said. “Bart Nichols put it in a lot more fancy words, but they all sounded like he felt the same. . . .”

“JOHNNY, you came down pretty hard on him,” the little woman said, reproachfully. “Why did you act as though he might have done something to her?”

We had a booth at Googie’s beanery, on Sunset Boulevard next door to Schwab’s, the drugstore where the man from MGM found Lana Turner slinging hash behind the soda counter fifteen years ago, if you believe in Hollywood folklore. The doll who brought my onion soup at Googie’s could have killed ’em in a sweater, just as dead, but now they’ve changed the rules and everybody has to make like Sarah Bernhardt yet.

“I’m just not satisfied,” I said. “There’s something funny going on.”

“But darling, it’s a simple tracer job! No matter how you look at it, the fact remains she packed a bag and drove off by herself.”

I shrugged and nodded, and continued ladling soup into the left side of my face. In this profession hunches are about as valuable as they are in banking or accountancy, but I was tired, and hungry, and a toothache isn’t much to help you concentrate. Suzy bit delicately on a piece of garlic toast and cut the bone from a small porterhouse, medium rare. “You know,” she said, “I don’t believe Jean broke with Bart because he wouldn’t let her take a screen test.”

“Everybody seems to think she did.”

“But darling, can’t you see? It doesn’t make good

sense. Suppose she did go after him because of his connections—why should she give up so easily? A calculating woman would have gone ahead and married him, and put herself in a position where she could have managed things. That telegram of hers sounds like she really loved him very much.” She saw my grin and bridled at me. “Men! you’ll never understand. There might have been a dozen reasons—any girl would know about them. Kathy didn’t say it was the test. . . .”

“She said she wasn’t sure.”

“Well, when we find Jean, we shall see who’s right.”

I sipped my coffee very carefully, and fired a cigarette, and said: “The part that doesn’t fit is where she suddenly pulled up her stakes like that. It’s not important why she broke with Bart, or even how she had it—that’s her own affair. But she isn’t the type to rush off by herself, without a word of explanation to her roommate or her boss. . . . You don’t suppose she was afraid of Bart?”

“Darling, don’t be Victorian,” said Suzy, scornfully. “That’s all been changed, as if you hadn’t heard; you men are scared of us these days. She had another date.”

“You’re quoting Ray. She might have told him that just to get rid of him. She didn’t mention it to Kathy, and I gathered that she wasn’t in the habit of sashaying off with strangers, for a night of sin.”

I wasn’t trying to be cynical, and from the way the little woman looked at me across the supper dishes I could see she hadn’t missed the point. This is one city where it definitely isn’t healthy to associate with strangers. “Oh, we’ll find her soon enough. She must’ve been upset, and she decided she’d go down to Palm Springs or Laguna for a few days’ rest.”

“That could be it,” I said, and rubbed my jaw. This

simple tracer job needed a shot of antihistamine; I wanted it the way I wanted asthma. "Better finish up your steak. I'll see if anything can be promoted on the phone."

The phone was outside, in a pay booth in the parking lot, and the receiver was already at my ear when I remembered I was out of nickels. I used a dime instead, and tried Doc Wittels at his home again. This time he was on tap, but promptly, on the second ring, as chipper as a man with a couple of beers and a pot-roast dinner aboard, a fifty-cent cigar in action and the kids tucked peacefully away in bed. "Ah, Marshall, greetings! How's the gumshoe boy?"

"Not good," I said. "What did you stuff into that molar, dynamite?"

"Bit sensitive, is it?" he cheerfully commiserated, but there was an undertone of mild astonishment. "Just rinse it with a little alcohol, and take an aspirin when you retire. If it still bothers you tomorrow, give us a bell and we'll check it for you at the office. . . . Did you find Miss Hendrix?"

"Not just yet."

". . . You mean she's really disappeared?" He didn't sound so cozy any more. "Well, I must say, I hadn't expected that. What do you think?"

"There's not much point for me in thinking, Doc," I said. "My job is finding facts, that's all, and I'm a little short on them. I've got to ask you if you know of any other men she might be interested in."

He cleared his throat and grunted at me, not embarrassedly but as a noise of more or less subconscious disapproval. "Interested? Oh, I wouldn't call it that."

"What would you call it, Doc?"

"The usual. A lot of patients like the looks of her. She's pretty clever at it, kidding them along. Then there's a former boy friend who kept phoning her until I told him off one day, not long ago. He sounded like a troublemaker, but she never . . . Hey, you don't suppose she got into a jam with him?"

"I'm looking into that," I said. "About these other patients—any of them offer putting her in pictures?"

"Mmm." He thought it over. "That's a running gag, of course, in any office where you have a pretty girl. Now that you mention it, there was a fellow in last Monday for a prophylaxis, said he had a part for her. He sounded halfway serious, at that, only she laughed him off. She mentioned to me later that she didn't want to go to Mexico."

"Oh, one of those," I said, to keep him talking.

"Yes, a Mexican producer. Seems they have a movie industry down there. First time I heard of it. He wasn't much to look at, but his teeth were beautiful. Cleaned 'em myself—they didn't really need it, but he told me he enjoys that sort of thing. There are a few of them like that."

"Know anything about him, Doc?"

". . . Perez or Pablo, some such name. I'll check the office card tomorrow, if you want. He's staying at the Fairfax Towers, I believe. I noticed where he packed a roll that would've choked a laundry chute."

It was my turn to grunt, not necessarily in disapproval, but without much curiosity. I said I'd call him in the morning, listened patiently to a repeat performance of the aspirin advice, passed up the chance to make the obvious riposte, and wearily bade him good night. It was cold in the booth, and my molar kept nagging at me for

that alcohol rinse, but I dug up another dime and started dialing a certain GLadstone number. Halfway through, a sudden toothache pang caused my finger to slip from the hole. I swore below my breath and jiggled the hook to recapture my coin and start over again. The dime produced a rattle and a click, but not the customary tinkle in the slot. I groped for it, in vain, and cursed some more, and pounded on the coin box panel, fruitlessly. It certainly was not my day.

The last dime in my pocket brought a dial tone, the number and a busy signal, then once more the rattle-click and silence. I gave the phone my No. 16, Crafty Leer, and probed its innards with a nail file, pried away the wad of chewing gum inside the slot and collected both dimes, with half a dozen nickels interest. This time the GLadstone number answered, in a hoarse, officious, Irish bass.

“Detectives, Hollywood!”

“How are you, Sergeant?” I inquired. “Lieutenant Hogan still around?”

“Who wants him? Oh, I know,” he promised me. “The hotshot kid it is, begorrah. H’arya, shamus? Sure, and the Lieutenant will be honored, hearing from the likes o’ ye.” He chuckled, ominously, and I gathered that the Sheriff’s Office had had troubles of its own, that Friday night; Detective Sergeant Barry Dunn had always functioned as its gouty toe, whose temper would reflect the weather. “’Tis a favor ye’ll be after asking him, me boy, I shouldn’t wonder now.” He smacked his lips in genial anticipation and depressed the intercom switch with a snap that crackled in my ears.

The voice that came on sounded gruff and skeptical and weary, as if it had long grown accustomed to an-

swer the phone and expect the worst. It said "Hogan!" complete with the exclamation mark, the way it had been taught some thirty years ago, because that was the way a cop should give his name: crisply and noncommittally, alert and to the point. It didn't need to bother, for its owner had for half those thirty years been in command of what out here they call the Confidential Squad, which meant he was a cop policing other cops—the kind of job to turn a saint into a cynic and to raise the question of how cold is ice.

"Lo, Dave," I said. "Who's on the quill with you these days?"

His sigh of resignation carried clear across the wires. "We got fifty-two thousand ex-cons in this county," he growled. "On account of the climate, is the way I hear. That ain't enough—we also got to be polite to guys like you, which has a piece of paper in their wallet from the State of California, it says we should leave you get by if you make like a dick. Okay, Johnny, what's on your mind?"

I grinned for him, affectionately, and reported: "There's another nickel grabber on your reservation. Try the Strip, this side of Ciro's, if you want to pick him up."

"Could be. You working for the phone company now?"

"Just public-spirited," I said. "You know me, Dave."

"Yeah, sure, I know you. So what's on your mind?"

"Well, if you put it that way," I said. "A black Plymouth coupé, year 1933, plate 15AX565."

"Hot car?"

"Uh-uh. A missing person."

"See Cap Blainey in the morning. Hall of Justice, 1622.

Tell him I said to fix you up."

"It's not that simple, Dave. This girl was seen last night. She packed a bag and drove away someplace. Cap Blainey wouldn't touch it, or he'd just put out a reader, and my clients wouldn't even want to go that far—not yet, that is. I wouldn't bother you with it myself, except for something I can't put my finger on. Call it a hunch, if you insist."

"... Police routine. Can't beat it, Johnny. Nobody can. You got to wait forty-eight hours, unless there's a suicide note or other evidence of felony. You call the downtown Index?"

"Sure we did. This afternoon. They didn't have her."

"Dames!" he scorned. "They're always disappearing. Next to drunks, they cost the taxpayers more dough to keep in line than anybody else. Since the war we been handling a case load of more than twelve hundred a year of 'em, just in this county—three or four a day, the ones we got on file. Then figure twice that many which we never hear about."

"You turn up most of them, don't you?"

"Most of 'em, yeah. Last year we flopped on only two hundred and forty-three, it says here in my little book, and more'n half of them was under twenty-one. You wanna guess what happened to those girls?"

"They must've known what they were doing," I protested.

"Should of known, is how we look at it. But that don't always follow. Couple of times, the FBI brings back a bunch of 'em from Rio or such places; just last March they picked up half a dozen in Hawaii. Young kids of fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Somebody rolls 'em over, shoots 'em full of hop and ships 'em off to where they'll

make a buck for him. You'd be surprised, the stuff that's going on."

"This isn't anything like that."

"Could be," he conceded indifferently. Another dame, another file for the statistics, another forty-eight hours—nothing to get excited about at the end of a hard day's work. "That all you want?"

The little woman saw me coming through the back door from the parking lot and shrugged into her furs; her wide gray eyes smiled up at me, sweetly impatient.

"Did you?"

"Not a thing. We may as well knock off and make a fresh start in the morning."

"You're not serious!" She shook her chestnut curls, indignantly. "Johnny, we've got to make sure that girl is not in trouble. Don't you realize that if she is, and we're too late to help, what it might do to your professional reputation in this town?"

I looked at her. The restaurant was warm and brightly lighted; possibly the sudden contrast with that dark and chilly phone booth had been playing tricks on me. It seemed as if there was a spark of russet in her curls, and two Castilian combs. The shaggy Persian lamb had faded briefly to white nylon cloth, a nurse's uniform to mold the high, exciting, youthful curves of her. A tiny cloud, equivocal with indecision, passed across her pretty face. I blinked against it, and reached for the check with one hand, for my wallet with the other.

"If it makes you happy, sugar bun," I said, "we'll stay with it tonight. You can stop worrying about Jean Hendrix now. Professor Marshall will get on the ball."

The dog was stirring restlessly in the back seat when

we pulled up under the eucalyptus tree again. He seemed to recognize the place and whined at us, reproachfully, aware that this was not where he could reasonably expect his dinner pail, already hours overdue. Outside the fog had cleared away, but rain was coming down in fretful gusts and flurries, like an old man struggling with the pressure sprayer on his garden hose. My dashboard clock said 10:15; most of the windows in the Byron Arms still showed a light through their Venetian blinds.

"She won't be home yet," Suzy pointed out to me. "Those cocktail parties . . ."

"If you mean the O'Neal babe, I don't care," I said. "They tell you only blondes are dumb, they'd better try again."

"Darling, she isn't either dumb. She couldn't be and make a living as a secretary. She's just nice, and unaffected, and upset because she doesn't know the score. What are we here for if you think that she can't help us?"

"There's the gal next door. She seems to know the score all right. And there's the manager. I'll give her a flash of my Junior Space Patrol badge and squeeze a pass key out of her. There must be something inside that apartment which can put us on the beam."

Khan stiffened suddenly and laid a heavy front paw on my shoulder, peered intently through the rain-blurred windshield and released a speculative little growl. A coffee-brown Cadillac brougham slithered past and turned into the driveway, fast enough to drench my radiator with a fan of mud. It skidded to a stop less than a hundred feet away from us with engine stalled and headlights dimmed, and offered us a broadside view of passenger and driver, vaguely silhouetted, like two shadows in a box. For a moment the shadows were quiet and

spaced apart; when they merged there was something uneasy about them, something discomposed. An arm came up between them, brusquely broke the merger, was absorbed in it again. The double shadow swayed a little, stayed in place a while, then suddenly split up once more. The door clicked open and the passenger got out and slammed it shut, in one quick, awkward move. The starter groaned, the motor caught, the lights flashed up, the brougham backed out of the driveway, tooled around and snarled away in second gear towards the boulevard.

I flicked my spotlight on. Kathy O'Neal stood on the lawn, forlornly, huddled in her wrap and staring at us like a child who's dropped the groceries.

The little woman was already taking off. I killed the spot and slapped the dog into the back seat, and went scrambling after her. That was one time my molar didn't bother me. I'd had a glimpse of Mr. Barton Nichols and his droopy black mustache behind the brougham's wheel.

"No. Oh no! I'm quite all right . . ." the Irish girl was saying. "It just didn't . . . I . . . that is . . ." She burst into a flock of tears on Suzy's shoulder, heedless of the rain.

"We saw him make a pass at you," I said indignantly.

She merely cried a little harder. Suzy frowned at me and started leading her away. I tagged along behind them, fumbling for a butt. There was a queer, unpleasant taste deep down inside my mouth that needed smoking out.

At the apartment door they managed with the key between them. Fifteen B was just about what I'd expected, with a little hall along the kitchen and a fair-sized living room in threadbare gray and blue frieze and neatly kept if obsolete Grand Rapids furniture. It made the grade

with a bare minimum of girlish frippery like painted lamp shades and a set of Kewpie figurines on the mock fireplace mantelpiece. I hooked a leg over one sofa arm and watched the ladies disappear into the bedroom. It was cold in the apartment and there was a sense of emptiness, an atmosphere of strange futility I couldn't understand. I struck a match and got the gas fire going that was old enough to lack a pilot light. I hummed "The Farmer in the Dell" and inspected the books on a shelf by the sofa, the magazines stacked on a window console. They were about what you'd expect: *Gone with the Wind*, and *What Makes Sammy Run*, of course, and half a dozen mysteries in paper backs. *A Star Is Born*, and *Vogue*, *The Disenchanted*, *Photoplay*, *Good Housekeeping* and *True Confessions*. It occurred to me that if Jean Hendrix had gone in for fishing as a sport, *The Compleat Angler* would have been up there.

Kathy O'Neal said from the bedroom doorway: "I'm so sorry. Can I get you anything?"

She'd put a housecoat on, and brushed her hair, and changed her make-up—now the hazel eyes were warm and bright again, and frankly curious. The little woman slipped an arm around her waist and led her to a chair. "Tell John about it, honey," she instructed, shrugging at me with her eyebrows. "Maybe he can make some sort of sense with it."

"But I . . . it must've been my fault! He'd had too much to drink, and I was trying to be *nice* to him. I've known him for so *long*, and he has never done a thing like that before. . . ."

"You mean he's an old friend of yours?" I said. "The way I heard, he came here from back East, not long ago."

Her smile was prim, a Woman with a Secret. "We

grew up together in San Joaquin. Bart went to California Tech before he started painting. You mustn't tell, but he was working in the art department of an advertising agency downtown, when they discovered him at RKO."

I pursed my lips at her; it wasn't often that Sam Levy fell for a publicity shemozzle, as he'd call it. "Then it must have been through you that he met Jean," I said.

"Oh, yes, of course. But that was last December, at a Christmas party," she explained. "He hardly noticed her, there were so many people, but she told me she was simply *smitten*—it was awfully romantic, in a way, because there wasn't much that either of us could have done about it—Bart was busy all the time and making so much *money*—well, you know, a girl in Jean's position, or in mine . . . Only she handled it so cleverly. He didn't have a dentist, and she sent him one of Dr. Wittels's cards, and kept following up on the phone until something went wrong with his teeth, last summer, and of course that's when she made him notice her all right. . . ."

"And once he did, he got himself in pretty deep," I said. "Or did he?"

"Johnny, after all!" the little woman scolded me.

"Well, I just asked. It seems to me the guy is sort of arbitrary in his ways. Which happens to remind me—you were talking to him on the phone while Jean was leaving, weren't you, Miss O'Neal? What did he have to say?"

"He . . . he refused to speak with her. You see, I'd called him trying, well, to get them straightened out, but Jean just laughed at me, and Bart already had received the wire, and he was mad, I guess. . . ."

"Think he was mad enough to pull something? I hate

to mention, but there are lots of guys who will go haywire when they get their egos trampled on. Maybe we should go back to Sunset Palisades and have another chat with him."

The generous strawberry mouth fell open and the hazel eyes were horrified with me. "Oh, no! Not Bart! He *couldn't!*"

"Darling, he was ten miles away when Jean walked out," Suzy reminded me. "You're overlooking that she must have had a reason when she ditched him, and a place to go."

"He might've known about that place," I said. "But I'll play dominoes with both of you, if you can show me any pips. It seems you girls are just a little short on those. Now, for example, Miss O'Neal, although you've lived with Jean for years, you still weren't very close exactly, were you?"

"That's not true!" She nearly wept again, with indignation. "You're just saying that because she wouldn't tell me anything about her plans. But last night was the only time that ever happened—we were *such* good friends, we never kept a secret from each other. We had always . . . can't you see that's why it's been so hard for me to *understand?*"

"It wasn't just her plans," I said. "How did she get her car repaired that night?"

Suzy looked up at me, surprised. The Irish girl regarded me with blank astonishment. "Her car? But, Mr. Marshall, I explained to you, that's why she was so late. The service station . . ."

"Not the service station, Miss O'Neal. Ray Summerhill. He fixed the coil for her, after he'd hunted up a spare. But that was still last night, and maybe last night

doesn't count. Suppose we set 'em up in the next alley; did she mention anything to you about a movie part she had been offered down in Mexico?"

The room fell silent, as if someone had walked in on us and pulled a gun. Rain lashed the windows, briefly, rattling them in an attempt to emphasize this disconcerted lull. My tooth started nagging again, like a small boy who wants a television set. Our pretty hostess squeezed and twisted on the ball of Kleenex in her lap, and blinked her lashes at me, anxiously.

"You must be talking about Mr. Pardo," she came up for air at last, in a ridiculously tiny voice. "Jean said he was a Mexican, or a Brazilian or something, when he called, and that she'd met him at the office, and he'd kissed her hand and raved about her hair. But she was making fun of him, the way he talked and acted—well, you know, she'd never . . . Do you think she could have *possibly*?"

"You mean he telephoned?" I asked her sharply. "How'd he get the number? Is it listed under both your names?"

"No, it's in mine." The hazel eyes were startled when they saw my point. "She must have given it to him, unless the doctor did. He phoned on Wednesday night, while we were having supper in the kitchen, and she talked to him for simply *ages*, but of course I didn't catch a word. If I had dreamed there was a chance . . ."

"Doc Wittels said this Pardo character was in his office Monday," I told Suzy, who had been regarding me as if I'd suddenly gone crazy. "But there was some question of a picture deal. Jean was supposed to've laughed it off. Maybe you'd better phone the Fairfax Towers, cherry pie, and see if he's still registered."

She nodded, and made for the bedroom in a flash of long and sleekly shapely legs. I stared at the O'Neal girl, pretty hard, and said: "Let's get it straight, young lady. If this should turn out to be the deal, then Jean may easily be in a nasty mess. We'll have to think in terms of something fairly drastic. Give it to me fast—what else did she let on about this gent, apart from all that stuff about his charming Latin manners?"

"But I don't *remember!* Can't you see, she made it sound . . . Well, you know, like a gag, as if it didn't mean a *thing!* She had so many patients who were always asking her for dates and telling her she ought to be in pictures—every other man who walks into my office tries the same on me, and neither of us pays attention any more. She did say he was here on business, just on a trip, and that he hardly spoke a word of English, but he had a lot of money—oh, *now* I remember!" She was suddenly exultant, breathing quickly, reaching for my hands impulsively. "He travels in a private plane!"

I winced at her and let my breath go in a whistle. "Holy mackerel! That's all we need, a wolf with wings. What did she pack?"

"I—I'm not sure. It wasn't very much."

"You know her wardrobe, don't you? Let's go in and see."

She rose obediently and led the way. The little woman met us at the bedroom door behind a puzzled frown. "His first name's Hannibal," she told us flatly. "And he's gone. The desk claims he checked out on Tuesday morning, but he left a forwarding address. Las Vegas, at the Last Frontier Hotel."

"That's where he must have phoned her from on Wednesday night," I said, uneasily.

We all looked at each other, disturbed. The town of Las Vegas, Nevada, has its points. It offers quick divorces and still quicker marriages, and a lot of interesting desert scenery, including Hoover Dam. It has more swimming pools and swank resort hotels and fancy joints to the square mile than any other place on earth. The gambling casinos are honest, for the simple reason that it pays. Stay out of trouble there and you can have a lovely time—get into trouble and you'll never be the same again. And this elegant, chromium-plated sucker package deal comes at a mere three hundred miles of first-class motor roads from its three million customers in Southern California.

Kathy O'Neal was on her knees before the chest of drawers, looking up at us in helpless consternation. "She—she took . . ."

"I know," the little woman said. "All her good lingerie and hose. A couple of favorite scarves, an evening dress or two and her best bathing suit. Her make-up case of course, and probably her only decent bottle of perfume."

"Yes, oh, yes! Her alligator shoes are missing, too, and—and her pearls! The necklace set Bart gave her for her birthday, just two *weeks* ago . . ."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Any time you two women get through with your wailing." I picked up the phone on the night stand, dialed the Long Distance operator, fumbled for a cigarette, and asked for a person-to-person connection with Mr. Benjamin Held. The operator wondered if I could supply a number and I checked my watch and told her no, but she should try the Silver Bullet and the Trocadero bar. Yes ma'am, the operator in Las Vegas would know all about those two.

I held the phone, and leaned against the wall, and watched the girls, their heads together, whispering calamity. The bedroom was chillier still than the living room, and didn't even have the gas laid on; they used a little portable electric heater of the radiant-reflector type that waited by the vanity and hadn't been plugged in. There were twin beds with fussy quilted coverlets in china blue that matched the skirting on the vanity, and there were gaudy yellow drapes, and a couple of Navajo rugs on the plain hardwood floor. There were mirrors all over the place, which in a way was just as well, because they took your mind off the landlord's idea of a wallpaper rose. The bathroom door stood open, and adjoined the wardrobe closet; the bathroom had shower and tub and the usual offices, all of it in cleanly scoured but mostly cracked peach tile. I didn't think the Byron Arms provided altogether the ideal sort of nest for two young kids with spirit and ambition for the better life.

Long Distance spoke up sharply: "Here's your party, sir!"

A city like Las Vegas is a natural for guys like Benjie Held. There are a lot of him around, most anywhere, but where he flourishes is in the spots that offer him the kind of tolerance and anonymity and nourishment a pilot fish is offered by the shark. Neither crooked nor honest, he lives off the scraps of those who may be both, the way a shark is both. He knows too much and doesn't talk about it, or at least not very loud; you'd hardly think of him as being useful to society, yet there are not so many cops, or private dicks such as for instance me, who could get by without his help. Stool pigeon's not the word for him: a stoolie sells out criminals, for money,

or for fear, or for revenge. Your Benjie Held would never dream of such a thing. He's in the business of doing favors, mostly minor ones, for those who may at one time or another be in a position to reciprocate.

His high-pitched, reedy little voice came scratching in across the static-laden desert wires with nothing less than a small yodel of delight. "John boy. *Baby!* Well, how about that, how's my lover man? So what's with you, ya lousy bum? Long time no see!"

"'Lo, Benjie," I said gravely. "Yeah, it's been a while. How you been hitting 'em, old pal? What's good tomorrow in the fourth at Hialeah?"

"Aw, nothing much," he grumbled. "Try a V on Dipsy Doodle, if ya gotta play with it. There's still a little heat down there from all them Senate snoopers, is the way I hear—hey hey, you didn't need no scratch sheet, baby! Watcha making with the taffy for?"

I laughed for him, a trifle hollowly, and said: "Just conversation, Benjie. All I wanted was you should be in the mood. Look, Benjie, I'd appreciate the inside on a mark from South America who's down your way. Mind singing me a little tune?"

"I'm mellowrooney, gate," he promised me. "I'll croon it for ya on the upbeat in the portis and the semi-portis, with the sharps and flats on top, awready. Just remember me at Christmas time, is all I ask." He waited, cagily, for me to come across.

"The name is Pardo," I instructed him. "Hannibal Pardo, said to be on tap down at the Last Frontier. Sounds like a real manager. Sit in with it for me, huh, Benjie, will you please? We're mostly interested if he wears a pretty redhead in his buttonhole. We've got a paper out for her."

He didn't answer right away; the line kept crackling empty static. When he came back on, his screech had been reduced to muffled chatter. "Sorry, baby. No can do. Hey hey, you leveling with me?"

My tooth flamed up like sudden wildfire. "Sure I'm leveling with you," I said. "What seems to be the trouble, Benjie? Is she there or isn't she?"

"... John boy, I wouldn't know. I tell ya, baby, if ya wanna do something, ya better step on it. If I was you, I'd leave it lay, catch, lover man?"

"We'll be right over," I informed him. "See you at the airport, Benjie. Bless your pointed little head."

He gulped at me, and I hung up on him and faced the ladies. "Doesn't look so good. I think Pacific Airlines has a midnight plane."

The little woman nodded, solemn-faced. Kathy O'Neal said eagerly: "May I go with you? Jean and I ... Oh, please, it means so *much* to me!"

I shook my head. "Oh, let her come along," said Suzy. "Dick will pay her fare, and she can't possibly get hurt. Not if she sticks to us."

"Somebody kindly rustle up a couple aspirins for me," I said, and reached out for the phone again.

Confusion broke loose, like a Chinese New Year. The women started fluttering around, the way they have of getting organized. A strip tease was performed for me behind the open bathroom door. A glass of water and two aspirins appeared miraculously at my elbow, and the airline number kept eluding me, because of shadows on the dial—when I pulled the bed lamp switch, the lights all over the apartment flickered out. The word I used immediately stopped the squealing from the bathroom; in the dark someone provided candles and a

match. The kitchen main switch had a single fuse, only ten amps and busted, and improperly screwed in upon a penny in the socket. I shook my head some more, restored the current and went back to try the phone again. Pacific Airlines sounded brisk and chipper, wishing me good evening. They had three seats for me, on the twelve-thirty flight.

That left exactly eighty-seven minutes to drive home, and feed the dog, and pack my shaving gear, and leave a key inside the mailbox for the maid, and drive the fifteen miles or so to Burbank Terminal.

5

THE BIG ELECTRIC CLOCK above the entrance to the coffee shop in the Las Vegas airport waiting room said 2:16 when we came hustling through out of the crisp November desert night. The coffee shop was warm, and fragrant with the odors of hot food, and humming with a crowd of customers in uniform from two big Navy transports on the service tarmac. Benjie Held, almost the only man in civvies, gazed morosely at the lemons on the quarter slot machine. He was a small, round-bellied, round-faced lad, with that unruffled, rosily clean-shaven, artless countenance peculiar to grifters on the make. His rancher Stetson was too big for him, but the camel's-hair wrap-around had been cut by expert hands to fit him smartly on the padded shoulders of his tux. His tiny feet were sporting polished dancing pumps.

I shepherded the ladies to a booth and sauntered up behind him, fairly cautiously. "Excuse me, buddy. Spare a match?"

"John boy," he said, addressing the machine. He fed another quarter to it, pulled the handle, watched the lemons clicking in and sighed at them. He handed me a book of matches as an afterthought, not bothering to look at me. The matches had been shaped like girls on tiptoes, wearing G-strings, and the cover mentioned Club 13, embossed in gold. "They've blowed," he told me flatly. "It's TB. You could of saved the ride."

“Oh, fine,” I said, not liking the casual way he tried to deal with me. TB means total blank, in grifters’ gab, and represents the brushoff, condescending type. “What goes here, Benjie? Why the chicken act?”

“Lissen, ya got no call . . .”

I took a handful of his collar in the neck and pulled him off his feet, discreetly, not more than an inch or so; a watcher might have thought we were just having fun. “You listen, sweetheart. All I want from you is where they are, right now. Get flip with me, and you’ll wake up at Headquarters, downtown. Then you can tell the cops about it, and go home, and pack your grip for Kansas City. That the way you want it, it’s okay with me.”

“Hey hey, leggo!” He didn’t even wriggle, but his grin was framed in tiny beads of sweat. I dropped him on his heels and he fished up a silk bandanna. “Baby, I ain’t ribbing you,” he mumbled. “Sure, the carrottop was here. She pulled a fade, a couple hours ago.”

“She makes a specialty of them,” I said. “You saw her with this Pardo character?”

He merely shrugged and nodded, unconcerned. I found a quarter in my pocket, fed the slot machine and pulled the handle. “What’s the rep on him?”

“The greaseball rube? Aw, he’s a wronggo,” Benjie told me listlessly.

The slot machine rang up three bells and spilled a jingling flood of coins. “Looks like you won some dough,” I said. “You better pick it up, before the rats start gnawing on it.”

“Whuddiamean I better pick it up? What kinda talk is that, huh, lover man? That was your play.”

I scowled at him and said: “You crazy goon, I never touch those swindle jobs.”

He lost his grin, and blew his nose in the bandanna, noisily, and squatted down to gather in the crop. "Where did they go?" I asked him pointedly.

"Baby, I'd tell you if I knew," he promised me. He sounded urgent, and sincere, and hurt with me and my coarse disbelief in him. "John boy, I'm outta turn already on this caper, but you know me, baby—any time, for you."

I rubbed my jaw; the aspirin was wearing off. It was the devil of a situation, and I couldn't seem to get a shot at it. For Benjie to be scared like this, there had to be an angle, one that compromised him locally. Such a contingency seemed vaguely feasible in some connection with my Latin pal. But it was plain enough that Benjie gave him little thought; he was more interested in Jean Hendrix as a source of trouble, which appeared, in this respect, faintly preposterous to me.

"Come off it, fella, will you please," I said, half-persuasively. "I've got to find this doll. It just so happens she's a friend of mine."

That did the trick, but good. He dropped three quarters, left another handful in the pay-off slot and scuttled like a frightened rabbit, ducking on all fours between my legs. I made a grab for him and almost got his hat. He was already half across the waiting room and darting for the exit to the parking lot before I got my feet back into service, and by then two brawny, sunburned lads in forest green bedecked with ribbons and chevrons popped up in front of me. "Say bud, why dontcha pick on somebody your size?"

I smiled for them, a trifle wearily, and said: "Forget it, boys. You're not exactly in the Halls of Montezuma," and retreated to my booth. The ladies had been watch-

ing, anxiously. "Darling, what in the world was that in aid of?" urged the little woman.

"You may order me," I said, "a bowl of mushroom soup, a glass of milk and two more aspirins. Because it looks like we'll be here a while."

Kathy O'Neal said eagerly: "But Jean . . . Is she all right? Isn't there something we can *do*?"

"Pay no attention to him, honey," Suzy said. "He's really very clever, and a good detective, but he loves to keep you in suspense." She flashed a glance at me with claws in it, affectionate ones.

I winked at her and strolled away from them, out of the coffee shop and through the waiting room. Most of the airline counter desks were dark and unattended, but the door marked *Operations* was ajar and showed a light. Behind it there were batteries of filing cases, and a lot of office furniture. One plump young man in shirt-sleeves was relaxing in a swivel chair behind a cup of coffee and a wood-block sign that called him *Wm. Duff, Asst. Mgr.* One spare old man in dinner jacket and a black fedora leaned against the wall, reading a foolscap document through horn-rimmed glasses and the curl of smoke from a fat black cigar. They both glanced up at me, about as interestedly as if they were expecting me to make a touch.

"This is the airport office, sir," the young one told me, patiently. It was the kind of patience he'd acquired after a week or two of dealing with a public to which *Operations* means the john.

"Okay," I said. "I've seen an airport office. I'm a taxpayer and everything. Now that we understand each other, may I ask if any private planes have taken off from here within the past three hours? Pretty please?"

The older man pushed back his hat and stared. "Who wants to know?" he snapped at me, as casually as a .45.

I stared right back at him and said: "Maybe you introduce yourself at the post office window, when you want to buy a stamp."

That fazed him, about the way Khan would be fazed by a poodle. He did not even wiggle his cigar. He dipped into a pocket and produced the biggest silver star he could have carried in there without tearing out the lining. "So who wants to know?" he snapped again.

I dug my wallet up and held it out to him, the flap thumbed off the celluloid. He glanced at it and waved it back, irascibly. "You're in Nevada, pardner," he reminded me.

"You mean you guys have got a law against me asking you a civil question?" I demanded. "Listen, I've met Sheriff Carter, and I'm sure he's going to enjoy it if I phone him in the middle of the night to tell him all about the wonderful co-operation I've been getting from his deputies."

This time he actually wiggled his cigar. "I'm Under-sheriff here," he said complacently. "The boss is up in Reno, making speeches at a peace officers convention When did you check in?"

"Just now. Pacific Airlines, flight 16."

He nodded to the shirtsleeved man and told him: "Go ahead, Bill. Sell the gentleman from California a stamp."

"If you say so, Mr. Shelley." The assistant manager looked at me doubtfully and stuck his nose into his coffee cup. When it came out again he swung his feet up on the desk, reclining to address the ceiling. "Private aircraft take-offs in the past three hours," he said. "None authorized. One take-off at 11:56 P.M., unauthorized. A

Beechcraft Twin Executive, arrived on Tuesday, pilot Murphy, registration XJ909." He swallowed the rest of his coffee in a gesture of finality.

"Unauthorized? You mean they just climbed in and hopped, without permission from the tower?"

"That's the deal," he promised me. "They almost crashed into a DC4 from Western Airlines that was coming in."

"This XJ serial's from south of the border, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's a Mexican ship. That's all the information I can give you, sir." The "sir" came pretty hard to him.

"Sure you can't tell me who was on that plane, or where they're headed for?" I pressed him urgently.

"No flight plan," he explained. "No manifest. Of course we've notified the CAB. If they come down on any field in the U.S. it means the pilot's license, and a nice big fine."

I was already good and mad at him, or I'd have laughed out loud. The next time that Beechcraft came down in the States it would have changed its registration, and the pilot's name would be O'Brien. "How about this girl who was on board?" I asked him. "Would you two comedians know something about that?"

The gaffer in the dinner jacket took out his cigar and spat with devastating marksmanship into a cuspidor, ten feet away. "Well, now," he said. "Maybe we would. That'd be reckoned for police business, pardner."

"It also happens to be mine," I told him angrily. "Whom do you think you're kidding, Sheriff? You're not even in this game. They've whisked her off to Mexico from right under your nose, and by the time you score a fall off those mañana cops down there she'll be

in shape where she won't even care whether we get her back or not. My clients are not going to approve of that. They want more action for their money."

He pushed his glasses down his nose and showed me that he had the poker face that launched a thousand chips. The shirtsleeved airport manager just snorted at me, more or less derisively. I bared my aching tooth at both of them and stalked out of the office, crossed the waiting room again and wandered back into the coffee shop. The Navy had shoved off; outside, the drone of its C54's was rapidly diminishing towards the west. The victuals I'd ordered were awaiting me; the ladies watched me with uncertain smiles while I was tanking up.

"Darling, where is she? What did you find out?"

"If you two children really want to help," I said, "you might go rustle up a charter pilot for me. There are bound to be a few around. Better make sure he's got a fast twin-engined job on tap, and that he isn't finicky."

They were already halfway to the door. I glowered after them and polished off my aspirins and checked my notebook for Dick Cross's very much unlisted number. There was a phone booth in the coffee shop, but the Malibu operator had quite a time, trying to wake him up and making him accept the charges. "*Who* is calling from Las Vegas, please?"

"Just say the guy he hired to beat Louella to the draw," I prompted her.

She must have left the circuit open, for his genial if slightly drowsy boom came instantly across the wire. "Good heavens, hawkshaw, what in blazes . . ."

"Do you recognize the party, sir?" the operator cut in snippily.

"Yes, yes, of course. It's perfectly all right," he managed to assure her. "John, you lop-eared screwball, what's the big idea? Where did you pick her up—at a crap table at the Flamingo?"

"You're not even warm," I said. "No fooling, Dick, this thing is pretty bad. She fell for a Mexican phony who promised to put her in pictures, and he's dragged her out of here before I could catch up with him. The local law has laid an egg, but I can feed it to the FBI, of course. They'll handle it all right, as soon as they can get the diplomatic red tape squared away, sometime next week. They have to work through Washington and through the Embassy."

". . . You telling me the Hendrix gal's been kidnapped?"

"In a sense. Recruited is the word. I can't be positive, but that's the way it looks."

"My God," he boomed. "Next week'll be no use! If I were ten years younger . . ." There was whispered consultation at his end, and Leslie's clear soprano: "John, how *awful*! Can't you do something yourself, tonight?"

"I thought you'd want me to. It can be done, I think, but it'll cost like sin."

"Sweetie, you're worth it. We can't keep it anyway. We'd rather pay you off than Uncle Sam."

I chuckled and advised her to get Dick to pull some strings and wire \$2000 to me at the Western Union airport office in an hour, and hung up on her. The ladies were outside the glassed-in phone booth, frantically beckoning to me. Kathy O'Neal was blushing with excitement, grabbing at my arm. "Oh, Mr. Marshall, we found *just* the man! He was asleep right by his plane, and we were scared about disturbing him, but he woke

up all by himself and said he didn't mind a bit. . . ."

"He's getting dressed," the little woman said. "He's quite a guy. We'd better go right over. Johnny, *what* is going on?"

"Not now, cupcake. Let's see your Tommy Tailspin first."

The hangar stood across a narrow cinder alley from the main administration building; it was one of half a dozen in a row, plain corrugated iron sheds that gave an eerie shimmer off the desert moon. A wooden sign with *Cummings Aero Service* lettered on it hung across the front arch from the roof. The boy in dungarees and Stetson leaning in the postern door was freckled, slender as a whip, and in his high-heeled cowboy boots came barely to my shoulder. He looked all of twenty-two, but was more likely ten years older and a former colonel in the AAF. He swept his hat off for the girls, revealed a bristling straw-blond crew cut and a dead-pan grin that made him a ringer for Billy the Kid.

He just said howdy when I introduced myself, and took our bags away from me, and stood aside for us to enter; inside it was cool and shadowy, and bare cement rang sharply underfoot. A faint clean smell of lubricants on metal hung around. I was no more than vaguely conscious of the plane that spread its wings in there almost from wall to wall. The only light came from a cubbyhole partitioned off behind the tool bench, where he kept a desk, a typewriter, two packing cases and an Army cot, already neatly made and with a pair of fireman-red flannel pajamas folded on the coverlet.

Kathy O'Neal was staring at them, like she'd never seen a bachelor keep house. "Oh, Mr. Cummings, we're so sorry to intrude like this. . . ."

He kept his grin tacked on and told her: "Yuh kin call me Shorty, ma'am." It was, for him, apparently a lengthy speech. He motioned at us to be seated, swung himself up on the desk, produced a bottle from the shelf and ceremoniously poured four shots of rye. He dropped the grin and looked at me expectantly.

"How soon can you take off?" I asked.

The shrug he gave me said right now. "She's fifty cents a mile."

"That part's okay. I'm worried about something else. Can you fly charter into Mexico?"

The little woman caught her breath. Kathy O'Neal choked off a tiny scream; her bright warm hazel eyes were very wide. The Cummings lad just shrugged again. "Mordida," he said coolly.

"What I thought. Those immigration boys down there are pretty fractious."

"Depends."

I rinsed my tooth in alcohol, just like the doctor ordered, and returned his wicked grin, which had come back to life again. "Mind if I use your phone?"

He pushed it over to me on the desk. Suzy asked sharply: "What's *mordida*?"

"It means the little bite," I said. "The soap, the juice, the fitted mitt. A very sensible arrangement between gentlemen of quality, not necessarily restricted to our gallant southern neighbors. . . ." The Long Distance operator interrupted me. I gave her the number of Tino Guzmán, down in Mexico City, and she went to work on it. Phoenix, El Paso, San Antonio, Laredo, Monterrey—the circuit chimes rang out, the glib dispassionate young female voices chattered volubly. Bueno, cuarenta—diez y seis—noventa cinco, bueno, por Las Vegas,

Estados Unidos, si. Un momentito, favor—El Señor Guzmán? Listo, Las Vegas, listo! Here's your party, sir. . . .

He came in vigorously, wide-awake, as if he'd just walked in next door. "Bueno! Cómo no, Las Vegas? Who is this?" I told him who, and he was obviously tickled pink with me. "Marshall, amigo! Holy smoke, how've you been? And how is the señora, she still got you buffaloed? What is this anyway, you in a jam or something? Holy smoke, it's five o'clock!"

"It's only three o'clock up here," I said and smiled, a little wryly. "Listen, Tino, are you still in business?"

"But certainly I'm still in business. What have you got?" By now I really had his ear. That suited me just fine, because he was a Mexican-American attorney who had served with me in CIC throughout the Africa and Italy campaigns, and after his discharge had joined an uncle with a reputation as the best divorce counsel in the Distrito Federal. I had referred him clients, when they came my way, and he'd been up to see us once, in '48, but that had been the last I'd heard from him.

"This may be quite a bit out of your line," I said. "But I need action on it, Tino, right away. Some fancy customer by name of Pardo put the snatch on a young lady I'm supposed to rescue from a fate et cetera. He's from your bailiwick, we figure, and he powdered out of here at midnight on a private flying machine. The registration's XJ909. I'm standing by to follow, with a charter pilot. Can you set him up for us?"

He whistled, doubtful but impressed. "Your flyboy know the ropes?"

"I think so, yeah."

"He'd better. Holy smoke, a private plane, in Mexico!

Where can I call you back? I'll have to have say half an hour."

I read the number off the dial shield for him and he hung up and started flashing for his operator. I hung up myself and glanced around. The girls looked startled, horrified and fascinated all at once. Shorty Cummings was dead-pan again, while he refilled my glass. "Kin do," he said.

"How much mordida would you estimate?"

"The migración, a thousand pesos. Hundred bucks. Yuh fish?"

"... What do you mean by that? I've fished for trout, up in the Sierras. What's that got to do with it?"

He shook his head. "Marlin," he mentioned pointedly.

Then I remembered where they had these deep-sea fishing grounds, all down the coast below the border, and I saw he must have taken parties down before, so that he knew exactly what should be our camouflage. I wondered later if he'd guessed our destination, but so far I was already pretty pleased with him. "A fishing trip it is," I said. "Maybe you'd better get all set to start. This Guzmán character is usually on the beam."

He pulled the typewriter across and slapped a manifest form into it. The little woman said: "We'll need a lot of money, won't we?"

"... I'll need a lot of money, cherry pie, not you. You two are riding back to Hollywood, in a nice, comfortable, air-conditioned DC4 that leaves at six A.M. You've got the tickets in your pocketbook."

They stared at me as if I had two heads, both of them rubber. "But we're coming with you," Suzy told me patiently, the way she'd have explained things to a sweet if slightly backward child that wanted to go see the zoo,

alone. "The plane has lots of room, and Shorty doesn't mind. He only charges by the mile, so it won't cost a penny more."

"You are not either coming, candy lamb," I said. "I don't care what it doesn't cost, but I'm not just about to brace a Mexican white-slaver mob with two attractive girls in tow."

"Oh, poo on Mexican white-slaver mobs! Johnny, we'll be all right, you know we will. And we'll be useful to you, too, because with us along you'll look like just another tourist, and they'll never notice you until you're ready to crack down."

Kathy O'Neal had grabbed my arm; the hazel eyes were pleading with me, almost desperately. "Oh, you've got to! I . . . that is . . ." She started crying quietly, suddenly, and groping for a Kleenex in her purse. "I'm s-sorry, honestly I am. But Jean would be so happy if . . ."

My treatment filling stabbed me in the skull again. I groaned, and slugged it with another dose of rye, and nearly crushed the shot glass in my fist. The Cummings lad appeared to be amused. "Reckon we kin take care of 'em," he drawled, and winked at me.

The phone exploded at my elbow in a clamor that resounded from the hangar walls. It brought more Spanish babbling to my ears, and Tino's cheerfully excited, accent-flavored baritone. "Hola, amigo! I have news for you."

"Say, that was quick. How did you do it?"

"It was easy," he assured me. "Check your map, amigo. There are not so many airfields in my country where he could come down at night, to fill his tanks. I hit the one he picked with my first call."

"Nice work," I said. "You're sure he is our man?"

“Qué cosa! But of course I’m sure. This XJ909, owner Señor Don Hannibal Pardo y Salazar, landed at Hermosillo half an hour ago. The pilot was just taking off again when I was on the phone.”

“Oh, fine. Was there no way you could have stopped him?”

“On what charge, amigo?” he inquired. His tone was pretty quizzical with me. “This Señor Pardo, he’s a big político in Santa Rosa, understand. I would advise you to be certain of your ground before you tackle him.”

“Well, has he got the girl? That’s all the ground we need. They couldn’t have mistaken her at Hermosillo, if she showed herself at all. She’s quite a dish, and with a head of hair like frozen cherry juice.”

“Ah yes, the redhead. She has been observed,” he breezily admitted. “From the tower, walking on the field, on Señor Pardo’s arm. They’re scheduled to arrive in Santa Rosa about six o’clock, your time.”

“Hold it a second, will you, Tino?” I directed him, and snapped at Shorty Cummings: “Where is Santa Rosa?”

“Thousand miles.” He pointed at the map that had been pinned up on the wall behind the desk. “Six-seven hours. Fish,” he added with his crafty grin.

“We ought to make it there by noon,” I said into the phone. “Think you can meet us at the airport, Tino? Looks to me like we might need some legal help.”

He laughed at me and said he had already made a reservation on an Aerovias Mexicana flight that left at 7 A.M. His “hasta la vista, amigo” sounded pretty gay, as if this thing were just some boyish prank. The ladies were all over me as soon as I hung up. “Darling, I knew you would be reasonable!”

“... How was that again?”

“You told him *we’d* be there. You did!”

I threw my arms up in despair and broke away from them, and slipped across the alley to the waiting room. The Western Union office had a check for me. I sent a taxi driver into town with it—Las Vegas is one city where you can get cash at any hour of the night, and where the cabbies don’t get out of line unless they want to spend a month in bandages. When I got back, the double hangar doors were open and the moon was picking high lights off the racy little Lockheed’s fuselage. The Cummings lad was on the phone and talking in a Spanish drawl to someone in Nogales, Arizona, where the field straddles the border and is used to clear all traffic on both sides, for those who are supposed to be on the legit. I pushed a wad of hundred-dollar bills across to him, and he just shoved them in his pocket with a nod, and said “bueno” a few times and slapped the phone back in its cradle.

“Weather clear,” he told us with a wink.

He grabbed our bags and hefted them aboard. A man in overalls came pattering across the tarmac on a motor scooter and said howdy to us all, impartially. He took some papers from the desk and pattered off again. The girls were scrambling up the ladder, squealing with excitement and displaying yards of leg. I sighed and swung myself through the hatch and found a comfortable seat between the wings. A heavy weariness immediately settled through my body; I was vaguely conscious of the starters yowling and the engine catching hold and warming up into a steady roar. Up front the radio supplied a tinny squawk, and Shorty Cummings muttered back at it in monosyllables. He turned around to us at

last and pushed his Stetson back. His grin had vanished.
“Fix yore belts!”

I fumbled with the buckle and was fast asleep before he'd taxied to the runway head and turned into the wind.

6

THE SUN STOOD HIGH when I woke up. It blazed into the cabin portholes with that unmistakable transparent glitter of the tropics. Six or seven thousand feet below, the ocean was a sheet of steel and lavender. I blinked at it, and closed my ears against the throbbing pulse beat of the engines, and sat up to grope for cigarettes. A Thermos bottle and a paper cup appeared in front of me; the savory aroma of black coffee crept into my nose.

"You snored," the little woman chided me.

"That right?"

"You surely did. We thought you'd never stop. You snored right in the nice man's face, after we landed at Nogales. The immigration officer. He was too gracious to disturb you."

From across the aisle, Kathy O'Neal gave me a funny little smile. "He was a very handsome officer," she mentioned wistfully.

Up front, the Cummings lad glanced back at us over his shoulder and performed a downward motion with his thumb. The blue Pacific took a crazy slant away from us, and through the portholes on our left a wall of dingy brown, eroded mountains came in view. It broke apart and gave admission to the ocean in a narrow bay, perfunctorily trimmed with yellow beach and moss-green vegetation. At the apex of the bay a clustered griddlework of white and red and gray betrayed the town. The plane ignored it, and began to climb towards

the mountain wall, and found a gap in that; the cabin floor acquired a sudden downward tilt, and we went roaring in through the arroyo like a hawk diving on pigeon, making for the airfield in the valley straight ahead. It was some airfield, just a stretch of chopped mesquite, with a few hundred yards of potholed gravel and crushed rock. The grimy yellow wind sock flopped uncertainly around in what they were employing for a breeze down there. We fishtailed into it, flaps clawing at the air, props milling in coarse pitch, and hit the gravel on three wheels, as if it were a cloak of velvet, and went bouncing down the taxistrip towards the modern white concrete and pumice brick and structural aluminum posada on the southern boundary, from where a narrow dirt road curved away towards the town.

The heat closed in on us as subtly as a hammer blow, the instant Shorty cut the gun. It was the eyeball-searing, palate-parching kind of open desert heat that makes you think of death, and of the place you're likely to be headed for thereafter. Nobody seemed to be around in it; the clock above the plate-glass door to the posada said 1:25. I scowled at Shorty, who was coming down the aisle, and he returned his wicked grin. "Head winds," he informed me. "All the way. Two hours difference in time." He jumped out through the hatch and helped the ladies to descend. The only sound came from a sagging wire-cage chicken coop in the posada yard. Inside the building it was cooler, but the snack bar and the Aerovias Mexicana desk appeared to be closed down. A fat old man in dust-smeared cotton khaki and a frayed sombrero nodded on the window bench. The single action .44 that dangled from his hand-tooled cartridge belt looked bigger than a field howitzer. He did not

seem to be aware of us. I went around and opened doors and scouted for a washroom, unsuccessfully.

A car pulled up outside on screeching brakes. Tino Guzmán came striding in, a symphony in pale café au lait—the crisply ironed linen suit, the nylon shirt and tie, the delicately tanned complexion. “Ah! Señoras y señores!” He seemed genuinely glad to see us, and his Panama swept off to brush the floor. “This place . . .” he said, and shrugged elaborately. “I have been awaiting your arrival in a hammock, on the patio of your hotel, my friends.” He kissed the little woman’s hand, and punched me in the biceps, and shook hands with Shorty Cummings, all in one continuous and graceful ceremony. He inspected Kathy with one eyebrow lifted in a mixture of surprise and eloquent approval. “Holy smoke. This ravishing young lady is your client?”

“Not exactly. She’s on close terms with the missing girl,” I told him. “Miss O’Neal, Mr. Guzmán. Our local legal eagle.”

“Señorita! I am both enchanted and distressed. . . .”

She blushed for him and clung to Suzy’s arm, as if she half expected him to make a pass at her right on the spot. I sneered at both of them and asked him bluntly: “What’s the deal?”

“They have arrived, amigo,” he assured me. “They are here.”

“Okay, let’s go and get her out.”

“But certainly. Of course.” He shook his head at me and pointed with his eyes at the old fatso with the .44, still drowsing on the bench. “It is the hour of the siesta,” he reminded us.

I pursed my lips and glanced at Shorty Cummings, who was slapping at mosquitoes with his Stetson. “Gas,”

he mentioned briefly, nodding at the plane.

"You fueled at Nogales, didn't you?"

He merely grinned and shrugged. I saw his point all right; we were some seven hundred miles below the border, and he didn't want to take a chance on his half-empty tanks. "What time can you be set?"

"They open up down here at five o'clock," said Tino carefully. He held the door and beckoned us outside. His cab, an ancient open Buick phaeton, was parked under the awning with its driver fast asleep behind the wheel. "You are not now in the United States, my friends."

"You're not just woofing, kid," I said. "One gathers that the situation is a trifle breakable, in your opinion. Better fill us in on it right now."

"If you insist. I think we shall be better off at the hotel."

"But Tino, can't you see?" The little woman tackled him. "We've flown here all the way from Hollywood to rescue the poor girl. She may not realize yet what she's up against—she has been baited with a silly offer of a movie part. We simply have to do something about her quick!"

His smile was half-amused, half-reassuring. "This, I understand. Please do not worry, we shall rescue her all right. But there is nothing that can be accomplished at siesta time, in Mexico."

"Well, we'll just wait at the hotel until five-thirty, and I'll dig her out," I said. "Then Shorty can stand by here at the field, and have the plane gassed up and ready. That okay with you?" I asked the Cummings lad, who was relaxing with his back against the door and squinting at his dust-flecked boots.

He creased his freckles for me. "Yore the boss."

"Of course, I will assist you," Tino said. "It may not be as easy as you think, amigo. The Señor Pardo may object to what you have in mind. He is a very big político."

"You told me that. In Santa Rosa. Does that mean he owns the Federal police?"

"Ah no. The Federales will co-operate with us. Reluctantly. If we produce an order from a court of law."

I stared at him and used a handkerchief to swab the sticky brow. "Hey, wait a minute. Who exactly is this Pardo character?"

"Amigo, it is hot here in the sun," he pointed out to me. "Our ladies will be bored with us if we discuss such matters at great length. He is a malo hombre, about whom there have been many rumors, and whose fingers are in many pies."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"We go to the hotel. You will be comfortable there."

The treatment filling had already started acting up again. The heat was getting me, and I was hungry, and my beard felt like a nailbrush. "Anything you say."

It was a shorter ride than I'd expected, and a wilder one, straight up and down through the arroyo with a hairpin curve descent towards the bay. The driver probably resented being interrupted in his nap. He leaned on the accelerator all the way and zigzagged through a herd of cattle, killed two chickens and a dog, and almost piled up smack into a Flecha Roja bus that crawled into the coast road intersection. Where the bay shore had been notched by surf erosion, just this side of town, the coast road dipped around a rocky cove that harbored half a dozen fishing boats. The Hotel Lido occupied the

offside headland with its white adobe bungalows and scarlet trimmings and tiled patios laid out under the gently rustling palms. The driveway swept along its private beach and ran dead-end into the parking lot. There were some twenty cars, with license plates from Texas, and Wyoming, and New York, and even California.

Our double bungalow was comfortable, Mexican style, which meant a swirl of trumpet vines and bougainvillea on the porch, and all the furniture in the wrong places, and a bathroom door that banged against the toilet bowl. "I must advise you not to drink the water from the tap, amigo," Tino said.

I had moved in with him; the girls had grabbed the other bedroom. "How about advising me which tap runs hot, so I can get a shave?"

He smiled, a trifle tolerantly, and struck matches to the kindling wood inside a little iron heater on the bathroom wall. Within five minutes, nothing less than steam came spouting from my lavatory faucet. I performed a shower, mowed the whiskers off and sat around in my pajamas with a quart of beer on ice he had mysteriously foraged for me. "That's more like it now."

His smile remained indulgent, and his beautifully tanned complexion smooth and dry. The handsome linen suit preserved its pleats immaculately while he lounged across the room in one of those equipales chairs with plain leather cross-straps. It wasn't easy to remember him as the Bill Mauldin type he'd been in Italy, in '43, when we were hunting Fascist saboteurs and snipers through the olive groves, with tommy guns and hand grenades. "Amigo, you'll forgive me if I seem to criticize?"

"Go right ahead. I'm used to it."

"I think you should have come alone."

"You're telling me," I said, and snapped a sweat-drenched towel at the big mosquito on my ankle. It was hot enough in there to cook a roast, but if you wanted a banana for dessert you could reach out the window any time. "You just don't know my wife. We are supposed to be a deep-sea fishing party."

"But certainly, I understand. You are a lucky man, amigo, although possibly, like most of us, a bit too lenient. A woman must be made to feel that she is subject to her husband's discipline."

He demonstrated with his slender, nut-brown hands, briskly applying palm to back.

"That's bachelor advice, my boy," I sneered at him.

"Perhaps." There was a twinkle in his eye, reminding me he was a special kind of bachelor, who saw a hundred divorcées parading through his office every year. "Of course," he said, "I have no reason to complain. Your Miss O'Neal is charming—muy guapa. Clearly your intentions towards me were of the very best, in bringing her."

"Go on with you. She's dumb, and she makes goo-goo eyes at every guy on deck, and she's too fat."

He shook his head at me, decisively. "Ah, no, no, no! You are mistaken there. She is a very special package, in my best opinion—if we had the time, I should be greatly interested. As it is, I am afraid these lovely ladies can but serve to cramp our style, to put it somewhat awkwardly. You see, amigo, I have learned this morning that the Señor Pardo really is connected with a movie company. Among a lot of other things."

"Well, well," I said inanely. "Is that right. A movie

company. One hears there are a few in Mexico."

"But certainly. We have a well-developed industry which turns out many tolerable pictures in the Spanish language. Also a few that some of us might not consider so. For special audiences."

"And the Señor Pardo's company?"

"The Señor Pardo's company," he placidly confirmed. "Of course you realize he does not occupy himself with the details. It merely happens that he finds himself in a position to discourage the authorities from interfering, and to claim a share in profits said to be substantial."

"He also seems to function as a talent scout," I pointed out. "The girl must know, by now. He talked her into leaving home and joining him, but when they left Las Vegas he was practically forced to kidnap her. His plane sneaked off the field without a clearance, and the cops were on his heels. Well, you're supposed to be the fixer in these parts. How do we tackle it?"

He gestured in regret. "If it were just ourselves . . ."

I saw what he was driving at, of course. A little muscle work would be the quickest way, since we were reasonably sure about Jean Hendrix being held against her will. We'd get her out all right, if it were handled smoothly, but there'd always be the chance of a commotion afterwards, before we could take off. That would involve the other girls, and get us in a mess. "What's the alternative?"

"A court order, amigo, and the Federales. I can telephone my uncle in the city, and he'll see the judge. But this is Saturday."

"You mean we'd have to wait till Monday morning? What about the local law?" His shrug was eloquent. "Now listen, Tino," I protested, "let's not fool around

with this. The kid's been silly, falling for that movie gag, but she's in pretty nasty trouble, and what's more, I've got a customer to satisfy who is important, and a damned nice guy."

There was a glint of speculation in his blandly amicable smile. He rose, and carefully smoothed out his trouser pleats, and waved me off the bed. "Perhaps," he said, "it would be best for you to scout the situation."

"In this getup?"

"But of course. There is no need for more than just to step outside."

I followed him in my pajamas to the patio. Our bungalow clung to the headland shore; some thirty feet below the patio balustrade shimmered the sky-blue ripple of the cove. The private beach, a strip of gaily colored parasols, lay slightly to our left. A speedboat roared away from it into the bay with two young ladies in French bathing suits and water skis in tow. Another bobbed against the weathered fieldstone jetty, unemployed.

Across the cove, an easy rifleshoot across, the nearside headland grew a bunch of palms, a row of rioting poinciana trees and a white stucco cottage, fairly sizable, of an advanced design and with a picture window facing the Pacific. Tino Guzmán jerked his head at it. "The Villa Corsica," he mentioned pointedly.

I squinted at it, one hand up to shield my eyes from the descending sun, like an Indian chief on a buffalo hunt. The place looked pretty prosperous, about the sort of hutch an electrician or a make-up man would have been living in, in Hollywood. It had a terraced back yard with a lot of flowers and some garden furniture; the ocean breeze stirred up the poincianas just enough to blur the details, at that distance, but I sudden-

ly became aware of one small patch of slightly more metallic, slightly less effusive red above the canvas back of a glider chair. "Well, I'll be . . . There she is, right there!"

"But certainly, amigo. I was watching her this morning, through a field glass borrowed from the management. She is attractive, I agree with you."

My treatment filling started burning up again. I managed to suppress a grimace. "Hell, it looks too easy. All we need to do is run a little ferry service in that motorboat. We'd have her back here in ten minutes flat."

He shrugged, impassively. "No doubt. If you were ready to take off with her, without delay." He let me see his watch; it was just after four. I bit my lip and said: "If she will only stick around another hour . . ."

As if on cue, a man came walking from the house and strolled across the terrace, making for the glider chair. He wore white shorts, a T shirt and a yachting cap, and at that distance he seemed short and stocky, with his face a swarthy blot. He stopped and gestured, something like a traffic cop, and waited, and advanced again. This time his handwave was as unmistakably explicit as a slap. The redhead got up slowly and walked past him to the house, away from us. Her skin looked very pale, compared to his, and she was showing plenty of it in a strapless play suit, Kelly green and clashing like a scream with the exotic foliage surrounding her. The man had turned around and watched her disappear before he swaggered after her.

"That him?"

"No, no, amigo. That one is a man named Luis Murphy, said to be the Señor Pardo's secretary, and a native of the Chilean Republic. There are other servants, but

I am informed their quarters are in town."

"This Murphy character would be his pilot, too? I thought he'd be an Irishman."

"In South America," said Tino with a grin, "you'll find them in the jungle, hunting with a blowpipe and some poisoned darts, and rubbing sticks to light a fire."

I couldn't seem to get much of a boot out of his sense of humor. "Anyway you didn't waste your time while you were waiting for us to arrive," I said. "But we're still stuck with it. Those girls are going to be hard to manage if we let them in on this."

He sat down on the balustrade and made fastidious adjustments to his trouser pleats. He wasn't smiling for me any more. "If you will bear with me, amigo," he suggested, "I will now explain to you a certain way for managing the ladies which has often proved itself effective here in Mexico."

By ten o'clock that night I had reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that he knew his stuff.

The Hotel Lido's dining room, at suppertime, transformed itself into the Club Nocturno Waikiki, by the expedient of turning off the lights and mustering a life guard and two bus boys armed with steel guitars and artificial leis. The music and the decorations were as thoroughly Hawaiian as an enchilada, but the guests were not particularly hard to please. Not after most of them had wrapped themselves around the third tequila fizz.

Our party occupied a ringside table near the bar and had achieved a reasonably mellow mood. There had been lobster salad, and a heaping dish of strongly spiced arroz con pollo, and a racy-flavored rum soufflé. Now

there was coffee, if you wanted to be nice and call it that, and cigarettes, and more tequila fizz. And there was Tino, pitching woo at Kathy with a Latin curve.

He was so good at it, it would have been a pleasure to relax and watch him work. Instead of that, I was supposed to follow suit. That was all right, that part of it, but after you've been married for twelve years you've got to have your wits about you just to keep from being obvious. I held the little woman's hand, and danced with her, and whispered the required sweet nothings in her ear. It would have been a lot of fun, except for the mosquitoes, and the wheezy music, and a constant urge to check my watch.

I must have got away with it because of Tino's talent in creating atmosphere. He managed to promote a smile, a dance step or a simple gesture into an illusion of romance that hung about our table like a velvet cloak. He quoted poetry, and taught us all the complicated Spanish phraseology for making love, and read the ladies' fortunes from their hands. They were as fascinated with him as if neither of them had been trifled with before.

But by ten-thirty, Suzy nudged me sharply in the ribs. "Darling, there's Shorty Cummings! At the bar!"

I'd seen him there ten minutes earlier, but I pretended looking anyway. The bar was dark, and packed with customers, and he was leaning on it with his back to us, but no one could have missed that straw-blond crew cut and those boots of his. "Could be."

"But he's supposed to be down at the airport, standing by!"

I rinsed my crippled molar in tequila and put on my No. 22, Complacent Smirk. "The guy has got to eat."

"There was a place . . ." She glanced at me and started

to get up. I pushed her back into her chair, and kissed the auburn curls behind her ear, and mumbled that I'd talk to him myself. He saw me coming in the mirror strip behind the bar and grinned at me, not bothering to turn around. I wedged myself in next to him and slapped him on the back. "They taking care of you all right?"

This time his drink was Coca-Cola, plain. He nodded to me and said yep, to make it stick. He added that he was all set, in those two words.

"You catch a nap?" Another nod. "Look, are you sure we can take off tonight and not run smack into those hills?"

"Full moon," he mentioned. "We kin make it."

"Okay, fine. Now listen, Shorty, better stick around outside. My wife is just beginning to ask questions we can't answer yet. You know the play; you give us fifteen minutes when the music starts, and you walk in and pile those girls into a cab and hustle off with them. I don't mind if you've got to crack their heads together—put them on that plane and keep them there. They won't have time to pack, but you might try to save my wife's fur coat, she's pretty fond of it. Don't wait for us for more than half an hour, and if the local yokels try to mess with you, don't stop to argue, just pour on the juice and scramble out of there. We'll be all right."

He winked at me and told me: "It's yore nickel."

"Hell with that. I'm counting on you, boy. You were the one who said we could look after them, back there in Vegas."

He drained his Coke, lifted two fingers in a quizzical salute and wandered off. The little woman kept a worried eye on me when I slipped back into my chair.

"What was he doing here?"

"Just checking up to see how we were making out."

"Johnny, how are we making out?"

"I've told you, sugar bun," I said. "It's in the bag. She'll be delivered to us safe and sound by midnight, and we'll have her back in Hollywood tomorrow morning."

"Yes, but why on earth can't we be there to comfort her and let her know she's among friends? Those Mexican policemen . . ."

"They're a touchy lot. You heard what Tino had to say. They'll play along, but they're not much for putting on a show where it looks like they're taking orders from a bunch of foreigners."

She bit her lips and creased her pretty eyebrows in a frown. I shot a warning glance across the table where my partner in conspiracy stopped whispering in Kathy's shell-like ear and beamed on us, benevolently. "No hay prisa," he assured us. "They will have her down at headquarters already. Very soon she will be here."

The Irish girl gazed up at him with something close to adoration as she reached out for his hand with both of hers. "Oh, I'm so glad! If Jean had only *realized* . . ."

"I'm all for going down there now," said Suzy, not too patiently. "It isn't fair for us to have a party while those cops are pushing her around and asking her a lot of silly questions. She'll be so much better off if she can talk to us."

"But certainly. If you insist, I will arrange it," Tino said. He rose and held her chair with all the ceremony of a first night at the opera. I staggered up myself and stared at him, but he was bending over Kathy now to help her with her wrap, and she was clinging to his

arm as if she meant to take it home with her. "Maybe . . ." she said, "that is, if Tino thinks we shouldn't go . . ." She blushed for us, as dusky as a rose. "I mean if . . . well, you know, they *might* not like us butting in. . . ."

I managed to suppress a chuckle, and the little woman said: "Oh, I give up!", not very graciously. But Tino had already signed the check and started leading us away. "In any case," he said suavely, "it would be shame to spoil the big surprise I have in store for you. In Mexico there is a certain custom which must be observed when gentlemen enjoy the pleasure of such company as we have had tonight."

He steered us firmly down the pebbled garden walk towards our bungalow. I spotted Shorty's taxi from the corner of my eye, parked in the driveway under the marquee, the close-mouthed little Westerner slumped down in the back seat. The night was bright with yellow moonlight, calm and sultry, with a heavy scent of wild gardenias. It was so quiet that the rustle of a bird among the palm trees sounded like a lot of noise; the distant rumble of the ocean breakers on the beach beyond was barely able to intrude. Our footsteps on the patio rang hollow on the tiles. A single tiny reading light burned in the ladies' bedroom; Tino pulled up chairs under the garden window. "We shall be outside," he promised speciously. "You must not show yourselves, no matter what occurs; if you are seen, it is considered an immodesty."

He had no trouble getting Kathy seated, but the little woman hung on to my sleeve. "You two are up to something," she accused us, and there was no coyness in her tone.

"Of course we are," I told her airily, and picked her up to put her in her chair. "It's just a serenade," I muttered in her ear.

She let me put her down before she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me fiercely on the mouth. I didn't think it was the grateful kind of kiss, but I had gone too far to let it worry me. Tino was at the door already, gesturing to me impatiently. He snapped a finger as we crossed the patio, and from behind the jacaranda hedge the local mariachi stepped in view, grinning from ear to ear—six light-colored youngsters in fiesta costume with accordions, and violins, and bass guitar, who promptly struck up *Pastelillos de Amor*. My wrist watch said 11:00 on the dot.

We ducked around them and across the balustrade, and raced downhill towards the private beach. Both of the motor launches lay along the jetty, but on one of them the engine exhaust pattered greasily. A man in frayed white cotton trunks stood up behind the wheel and waved at us.

"Vamonos!" Tino said, and jumped aboard.

I dived in after him, and we were smoothly pulling out across the cove, not very fast and with not much more racket than a muffled snarl. "So far, so good," I said, and nodded at the coxswain's back. "Sure you can trust this guy?"

"He's under the impression that we are concerned with a romantic assignation," Tino said. "In such a matter, clearly his discretion is a point of honor between caballeros. Anyway, we're not depending on his boat to take us back."

"Not if your driver doesn't let us down."

"No fear of that, amigo. He's been promised fifty

pesos, which is more than he could otherwise earn in a week. He will be on the coast road, parked a hundred meters from the house, you may rely on it."

"We might look pretty silly if he isn't," I reminded him, and sucked my excavated tooth, which had begun to throw off the effects of the tequila anesthetic. "Did you find out if they keep a dog?"

"There is no dog," he promised me. "It is unfortunate, however, that the bedrooms are upstairs. According to my information, we should find her in the one immediately to our left. Of course, we must take certain other possibilities into account. . . ." He turned his back towards the coxswain, took my hand and slipped a flat black pistol into it.

I grunted, checked the load and stuffed it in my belt. It was a Belgian 7.65, a pretty common piece of Continental hardware and as skittish as a stick of dynamite. "You didn't borrow that one from the management," I said.

He leered at me, and patted his own pocket, reassuringly. For all his bland urbanity, this was more fun to him than watching ants invade the pickle jar. That didn't make him anybody's dopey little boy; back in our Army days he'd been about as helpless as a cobra, but I wasn't altogether sold about the job in hand requiring just that sort of helplessness.

The motor launch slowed down, reversed propellers, briefly nudged the jetty at another narrow strip of yellow sand, then snarled away again and left us standing there. The distant strains of mariachi music drifted back to us across the water, very faint. It was *Perfidia*—I recognized the tune while we were scrambling up the hill towards the terrace of the Villa Corsica. The terrace lay

deserted, bathed in moonlight, offering no cover for at least a hundred yards, but all the windows in the house were dark. We made it to the back porch, on our rubber heels, in thirty seconds flat.

There was a kitchen entrance, and there were two double French doors to the living room.

Of course no private residence has ever been constructed that could stop a man from breaking in, but French doors are the sitting ducks of burglary. A pocket knife, a diamond ring to cut the glass, or in most cases just a simple push will do the trick. More often still, someone will have forgotten to lock up, if you can call the junk that builders use on them a lock. I tried the knob on one of them, and that was it all right—walk right on in and make yourself to home. My pencil flashlight swept in through the crack and probed the casement plinths, but found no trip switch wire or anything sophisticated there.

The living room was cool and pretty sizable, what we could see of it. It ran clear through into the front-door hall, some sixty feet of it, all ornamental tilework and some very interesting Oriental rugs. There was a concert grand smack in the middle of the floor, which is supposed to be the works, in Mexico. There was a lot of heavy native hand-carved furniture, but not too much of it, for all that space. The staircase seemed to be mahogany with solid iron banisters; it pushed up from the hall in a magnificent if slightly freakish curve. It was a room that had its points, if that would be the style you were accustomed to, and if you didn't mind the musty sort of smell.

I was halfway across, and Tino all the way, unlatching the front door, when from the shadows near the sofa

came a raucous little voice, gruffly irascible yet somehow shyly cautious as well.

“Qué hay, muchacho?” it inquired of us.

The pistol was already in my hand; the slender flashlight beam stabbed at the sofa and found nothing there. The raucous little voice squawked in protest, not very loud. “Casa usted,” it said. “Qué hay, muchacho? Ra-a-awk! Usted es muy simpatico!”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” I said.

The flashlight scored a hit upon a restless bundle of bright green and yellow feathers and a pair of beady little yellow eyes. Tino had grabbed a heavy Oriental shawl off the piano and came rushing over with it, just about two seconds late. The cockatoo indignantly rattled its chain and flapped its iridescent wings; its gritty chatter rose into an angry screech. “Ra-awk! Cuidado, malo gringo, malo gringo! Ra-a-awk!”

The ceiling chandelier, a pretty ostentatious piece in gilt-edged crystals, clicked to life.

I realized immediately they’d been set up for us. Not in the way a couple of American bad boys would have prepared for the reception of unwelcome visitors—they saw no opportunity for suitable dramatics in the sawed-off-shotgun-round-a-corner style. They just walked in on us, like lion tamers entering the cage, supremely confident that they could make us sit up on our little painted pedestals. The swarthy one I’d watched that afternoon, out on the terrace, wore a badly fitting dinner jacket and black tie, probably borrowed specially for the occasion. The fat one with the comedy mustache was in black silk pajamas and a tasseled steel-blue velvet dressing gown. Their guns were dainty little automatics, twenty-fives, the handles probably inlaid with pearl.

It was a real cutie of a situation, like a game of stud for four, with everybody showing up an ace.

Right away from the start, it was clear nobody cared to put the blast on anybody else. The world is full of hopheads who will go hysterical on you and throw a lot of lead around, the minute they get in a fix. But in the hands of anyone with any sense, a gun is just a tool, and not such a very reliable one at that. It can get jammed, and you can miss with it quite easily, at fifteen feet or so, and even if you don't, the other guy will usually still have time to shoot you full of holes, before he checks his hand. At best, you wind up with a nasty legal brawl, and lots of bad publicity.

So we just stood there, sneering at each other, while the fellow with the scythe sat by and crossed his bony knees.

I worried more about the pilot than I did about his boss, who jawed away at us in liquid Spanish, faster than I could make out. Most airplane jockeys are a bit inclined to take a chance, when they're not flying, and this Murphy lad had too much Indian blood in him. There was a twist around his fleshy lips I couldn't use, and something just a little functional about the way he kept his gun traversing back and forth, from Tino to myself.

"Let's break it up," I snapped. "We haven't got all night."

"But this is a funny joke, amigo," Tino said. "The Señor Pardo is expecting us. He thinks we are the representatives of a collection agency."

"Well, that's one way of putting it."

"Ah no, amigo, not at all. There is some question here of money." He shot back a stream of Spanish eloquence at our involuntary host and passed along the testy crackle

of his answer. "Fifteen thousand dollars. It appears this sum was lost at various establishments across the gambling tables in Las Vegas, and that checks were signed for various amounts, which failed to clear the bank."

I kept my eye and pistol barrel on the Murphy lad, but hard, and gave this brand-new merchandise the up and down. It is a fact that they don't like you in Nevada if you pass the stretch around, for gambling debts, and some of their collection tactics in such cases are a trifle unconventional. For fifteen thousand dollars they might even send a gun or two to Mexico.

"Sounds like a stáll to me," I said. "Just tell him why we're here. Tell him he's got three minutes to produce the girl or wind up in the hospital. I don't care which. He probably can't hit a barn door with that fancy pea-shooter of his, and he's the sort of guy who gets his teeth scraped by the dentist just for kicks. Let's see if he enjoys to have them dig the slugs out of his liver."

"Ya lo créo," Tino said, and gestured dangerously with his gun arm. "But you do not understand, amigo. It is not the Señor Pardo who has signed these checks. It is your redhead who has been the naughty one. The Señor Pardo claims he merely is protecting her."

My treatment filling stung me in the ear again. I almost stopped paying attention to the Murphy lad.

"Listen, you tell him he's a fat-faced liar, will you please? The Hendrix babe is just a kid. She'd never dare to put the bite on those Nevada hoods. If she signed anything, it was because he forced her to."

The Señor Pardo had been making visible attempts to follow me. He seemed to suffer more bewilderment than indignation. "Hah!" he interrupted us. "Whatta you mean, I force?" His formidable double chin was wag-

gling fitfully; his accent sounded like a barking seal. "She beg me, hah? Nevada put her inna calabozo, maybe keel her, hah?"

Tino Guzmán grabbed at my shoulder and said: "Holy smoke!" and pointed with his gun arm, recklessly. A girl was standing on the staircase, halfway down, leaning inside the curve and watching us over the iron banister. I slid a foot across the rug to put the concert grand between me and the Murphy lad, and cocked an eye at her. She was the type you'd pass by on the street without a second glance, but in this kind of situation, in a white-lace negligee with nothing under it, she looked like something luscious enough to eat. She wore her rich burned-crimson locks dressed for the night, tied loosely with a pale-green ribbon and pitched forward in a graceful wave across one shoulder, covering the breast, in quasi-striptease style; her features were an oval mask, made up with expert care, gravely composed to where they showed no more than placid curiosity. If you were in the market, she had all the goods for sale—I didn't even doubt that she could cook. The only trouble with her was that she was not Jean Hendrix.

I put one hand on the piano for support and asked her: "Lady, would you mind? It must be the tequila, but just who the hell are you?"

We had ourselves one of those endless silences you get before someone rams down the plunger and blows up a cliff. She kept on watching me, and I kept trying to stand up on rubber legs, and Luis Murphy kept traversing with his gun. The fat man ran a thumbnail through his nasty little black mustache and scowled at me. Tino Guzmán was quietly laughing up his sleeves at all of us. The green and yellow cockatoo had kept its peace this

long, but now it flapped a wing. "Qué hay, muchacho?" it inquired uneasily.

I groaned and said: "Please, lady, don't just stand there looking beautiful. We don't want money, and we don't work for the Syndicate. If you're the one who flew here from Las Vegas with these characters, there's been a terrible mistake."

She had a nice contralto voice, cultured and carefully controlled. It was a voice that had Vassar in it, or Radcliffe, and Bar Harbor, and a certain weary skepticism about men. It also was a voice that could get checks accepted by a gambling-house cashier. Nevada doesn't snub the divorcées with Eastern bank accounts.

"Why should I tell you anything?" she asked me soberly.

My wrist watch said 11:44. I winced at it and felt the sweat break out between my shoulder blades. The airport would be a ten-minute ride, and Shorty Cummings would be taking off at midnight, possibly five minutes earlier. "Because we're looking for a little dental nurse with hair like yours," I snapped at her. "She was supposed to have been kidnapped by this joker here, after she'd joined him in Las Vegas on his promise of a movie part for her. The way you people took it on the lam from there it almost had to be a snatch, and when I checked around I could get nothing but a lot of double talk."

She sounded courteously bored with me. "Aren't you a bit confused? Nobody hires a dental nurse to act in pictures any more."

"This guy was trying to."

"If you mean Mr. Pardo, I've a contract with him for myself. But I'm an actress, my good man."

Our gracious host was making something of an effort to keep up with us. He loosed another one of his explosive barks. "Whatta you mean I keednap, hah? These norse een Hollywood, ees vairy pretty girl, I talk to her, she weel not come to Mexico. Por nada, ees okay by me, hah, I no care."

"You phoned her from Las Vegas, Wednesday night," I said. "On Thursday night she packed her bag and disappeared from home."

"Qué cosa! She no come to me. I phone her, sure, I talk to her, she tell me her young man no like, she weel get married soon. Ees plenty other pretty gorl, hah? Gorl weeth hair like these, for Technicolor movie, hah?"

"Oh, don't be silly," I said wearily. "The Technicolor people wouldn't touch your kind of stuff. How did you get her number, will you tell me that?"

The front door Tino had unlatched when we came in swung open with a bang, and Shorty Cummings strode into the room. His freckled baby face looked just as bland as if he were in church; his arms in their scuffed-leather flying jacket sleeves swung loosely by his sides. Suzy was stepping on the heels of his high cowboy boots and taking in the situation at a single, sweepingly reproachful glance.

"Oh, Johnny, *honestly!*"

Kathy O'Neal walked in behind them, bashfully, and shrank back from the guns. She saw the redhead on the staircase, made a grab for Suzy's arm and screamed, a piercing, marrow-chilling scream of instant agony. The Murphy lad wheeled half around and growled at her, without articulation, like a startled animal. I drew a calculated bead on his right elbow, and the fellow with

the scythe uncrossed his legs and cocked his grinning skull.

Shorty Cummings gestured briefly, and his freckles barely rearranged themselves. From nowhere in particular a heavy Army Colt made its appearance in his hands. He looked straight at the swarthy man and told him: "Drop it, pardner!" in a careless, almost sleepy drawl. That made it five of us and three noncombatants—enough to start a revolution on the spot, too many to play games in anybody's parlor. Our involuntary host was jabbering some more in Spanish, and the redhead took a step back from the banister. The swarthy man began to sweat, and hesitated, with his little pistol swinging back from Kathy to the Cummings boy, who promptly shot into the floor, between his feet.

A .45 uncorked indoors will give you quite a turn. Concussion hit us like a fist; the noise reverberated off the walls. The swarthy man leapt clear into the air and crash-dived on the rug. His pudgy boss let out a startled yelp and threw his gun away, ten yards across the room. I didn't blame him very much—I almost dropped my own. Tino Guzmán had put up his, and came up with a roll of fishing line, the heavy-duty kind they use on tuna boats.

I let him go to work with it and reached around the little woman's waist. "The show's a flop. I'm sorry, cherry pie."

"It's not your fault."

"I think it is. It looked as if we couldn't miss, but just the same I should've double-checked."

"Darling, you're sure they haven't hidden her upstairs?"

The redhead had, from some mysterious hiding place,

produced a lighter and a cigarette. She leaned across the banister again, coolly disdainful, watching us, inhaling rapidly in nervous little puffs. "You're welcome if you want to snoop around," she told us loftily. "Nobody's there to stop you, so you big brave bullies can't get hurt."

Suzy glanced up at her, as casually as if she'd merely barked and wagged her tail. I shrugged at both of them and said: "It's nice of you not to object. And while we're at it, sister, I'd suggest you slip into something less comfortable and get ready to check out with us, but fast. That contract you're so proud of isn't worth a copper peso, and the picture you're supposed to star in will be strictly for the smoker trade. If that's the way you want it, suit yourself, but you'll be better off to fly right back with us to California."

She stared at me, half-outraged, half-incredulous. I pushed on past her up the steps and prowled the second floor. There were three bedrooms, two of them rigged up with pretty fancy trappings, and the one immediately to my left had mirrors in the ceiling, and a bathroom with a built-in vanity. The crystal ashtray on the bedside table held a long and very black cigar, still smoldering offensively. But she'd been right, of course. There was nobody there.

Downstairs they had already whistled up our cabs, including Tino's driver from the coast road, and were loading in the girls. Kathy O'Neal was stumbling, and as pallid as the wad of Kleenex she'd been using on her eyes. The redhead hadn't moved an inch; I dumped a bunch of clothes, her smartly tailored mink-dyed rabbit and her pocketbook across her arms. "Get in with them, Miss X. You can dress in the plane."

"Oh, thank you very much. I'll stay right here, if you

don't mind."

"Sure, that's all right. Except I'll have to lock you up. We can't afford to have you cut the strings on those two packages. Your boy friend is a very big *político*."

She hesitated, just a little. "Were you . . . making fun of me? About the sort of pictures he produces?"

"Not a bit. That's how it is, straight goods."

"I can't go back." She shuddered, uncontrollably. "Not to Nevada."

"Well, we're going to Los Angeles. If you can square yourself with Immigration as a citizen, you should make out okay."

She suddenly ran down the stairs and plunged out through the front door to the cars. The Murphy lad strained at his bonds, rolled over on the tiles and spat at her. The Señor Pardo lay quite still and stared at me with bloodshot eyes that were as vacantly expressionless as ten-cent marbles on a dinner plate. The cockatoo recovered from its shattering experience and feebly stirred its chain. "Adios, muchacho!" it squawked after me, uneasily.

The airport was in darkness, and the paunchy cop in khaki snored on the posada bench, his frayed sombrero covering his face. The little Lockheed gleamed mysteriously in the moonlight and appeared to strain against the pegs that anchored it aground. Tino Guzmán posed elegantly by the hatch and clung to Kathy's hand. His "hasta luego, Señorita" almost brought a smile from her between the tears. I poked him in the chest and grinned at him, a trifle ruefully. "Sure you don't want a lift?"

"No, no, amigo, there's no need for me to trouble you. The Aerovías Mexicana flight leaves here at dawn. My office will submit a bill to you, as you requested."

"Better tell them not to lay it on too much," I begged him. "This one I might have to pay myself."

He smirked for me and slapped me on the back. The starters whined and coaxed the engines into sputtering life. I dragged myself aboard, and slammed the hatch, and slumped into the nearest seat; my treatment filling was a pulsing flame. The little woman reached across the aisle and squeezed my hand. Two seats away, the redhead, still without a name, was wriggling clumsily into a pale-green linen dress.

The Cummings boy glanced back at us over his shoulder. "Fix yore belts. . . ."

Behind me, Kathy's plaintive sobs were drowned when he turned up the throttles. We were flying north above the Sierra Madre and she'd cried herself to sleep before it suddenly occurred to me I hadn't even bothered to inquire about the reason why my orders for the ladies' safety had been totally ignored.

“DARLING, you didn’t *really* think I’d let that pint-sized cowboy herd us off like so much cattle!” said the little woman disapprovingly.

I leaned back in my creaky swivel chair and put my feet up on the old War Surplus desk, and looked at her. It was a look that mingled husbandly affection with a certain speculative thoughtfulness; behind it was the memory of Tino’s slim brown hands coming together with a snap. *You are a lucky man, amigo, although possibly a bit too lenient. . . .*

“From what I saw of him, he didn’t try too hard,” I said. “I guess this time you get away with it.”

We’d staggered back into our place on Broxton Avenue at eight, that Sunday morning, feeling like the veritable wrath of God. The plane ride into Burbank had been bumpy, and the immigration people at the airport hadn’t loved us very much. Our nameless redhead had been taken out of circulation by them, and the rest of us raked back and forth across the coals. Then we’d dropped Kathy at the Byron Arms, and she’d come up with more hysterics when Jean Hendrix wasn’t there, nor any word of her. That simple fact had been by way of a surprise to me. Life’s little ironies are something which one learns to take for granted, and their absence can create a queer effect.

But abject failure always has been bitter medicine. We’d swallowed same, and logged six hours’ sack time,

and digested it. Now it was Sunday afternoon, and on the desk were the remains of brunch, and next to that my yellow scratch-pad covered with a lot of pencil writing, none of it especially informative:

Hendrix, 21, grad. H'wood High at 16, 3 yrs. USC dental college, lost parents at 18, traffic accident, moved in with college chum O'Neal. Grad. USC at 19, employed as nurse by Dr. Wittels. Met Nichols last Xmas, fell for him, bided time, snared him through dental appt. last summer, but not formally engaged to him until 2 wks. ago, early Nov. Susp. of seeking fulfill movie ambitions, but screen test blocked by Nichols last week. Rec'd offer of movie part from Pardo last Mon., rejected this but apparently supplied P. with her phone number. P. phoned Wed. night from LV, rept'd offer, claims she refused again, stating her boy friend would object and that she wanted to get married soon. (No confirmation from O'Neal who was in kitchen, did not hear the conversation; phone in bedroom.) On Thurs., appears nervous and preocc. to Dr. W., asks to leave early, says she has a date. (Confirmed by O'Neal, Summerhill) At 4:47 PM wires Nichols—"Don't be mad, there's just no sense to us, you will be happier without me." (Wire rec'd by N. appr. 5:15.) At 5:00 PM, leaves office, met by Summerhill outside, attempts brushoff but discovers car won't start. Summerhill fixes car, which takes 45 mins., accepts brushoff. She comes home "in a rush," past 6:00, has bath, changes clothes to "traveling suit," packs bag. While she's in bath, Summerhill admitted to living room by O'Neal, but once again brushed off. While dressing, tells O'Neal she's broken off with Nichols, hands O'Neal her ring to return to N. (But not a valu-

able pearl necklace she rec'd from N. as an engagement gift.) O'Neal upset, phones N., but he's been drinking and won't talk. Hendrix laughs, runs out, drives off—time presumably appr. 7:00 PM. *Appraisal*: Nice girl, spirited, ambitious, unsure of herself, not well-balanced but “clever with boys.”

Nichols, 28, native of San Joaquin, Calif. Grad., local high school, Calif. Tech. Arr. in H'wood about 4 yrs. ago, job in art dept. of adv. agency. Had been painting since college days, probably lived in East or abroad some time. “Discovered” as portrait painter by movie colony, 2 yrs. ago. Usual publicity nonsense, ladidah about being prodigal infant from Maine, etc. Appears he's taken Hendrix disappearance badly, yet makes drunken pass at O'Neal on Fri. night. Movements on Thurs. night unknown, but was at home ten miles away at 7:00 PM. *Appraisal*: Fine artist, impressionable, emotionally unstable, alcoholic, strange ideas (his vitamin addiction, artistic conception of ideal female figure cf. Summerhill).

O'Neal, 23 (?), grew up with Nichols in San Joaquin. Lost sight of him after he left for college, met him later when he worked for adv. agency in H'wood. (She introduced Hendrix to him at last yr's Xmas party.) Met Hendrix at USC, took care of her after her parents' fatal accident. Has job as secy, Federated Industries, downtown. Movements on Thurs. night—came home by 6:00, fussed with Hendrix, S. and N. for an hour or so; after H. left at 7:00 prepared some supper for herself and walked to movie round the block (Q.—Did H. return or phone while she was at the movie, say from 7:30 to 10:30?) On Fri., was upset by H's continued absence, but went to work as usual, assuming H. would be on her

own job at Dr. W. Tried calling her but phone busy during lunch hour. To Nichols cocktail party for the Leslie Cross painting at 6:30, etc. *Appraisal*: "Charming girl, a bit effusive" (Richard Cross), not very bright, over-emotional and silly about men, some sort of mother complex towards H.?

Summerhill, 24 (?), general background unknown. Hendrix's college "steady," got involved in liquor store holdup. Convicted, prison sentence started same day Hendrix parents killed. Released last summer, att'd win her back, but H. not interested, "had her cap set for Nichols" (Dr. W's words). Has persisted all these months without success. Job as technician, Technicolor lab. Knows Nichols, and considers him a "long-haired screwball." Movements on Thurs. night: see per-above. After second brushoff, claims he bought some liquor and went home, was seen by neighbors (Betty-Lou and mother) to arrive, stayed home all Fri. drinking until visited by Marshalls. *Appraisal*: Pathetic case of promising young man gone wrong, ruined by alcohol and bad companions. Appears to be in love with H., but claims she made it "rough for him."

"It sure looks odd," said Suzy with a frown.

"I can't make head or tail of it," I said. "There are so many contradictions and so many open questions, we'll be practically forced to start from scratch. Of course you know how this is going to come out. One of these days, maybe as early as tonight, she'll turn up safe and sound at her apartment, and be very much surprised that anybody should have worried about anything."

The little woman dropped my scratch-pad on the desk again and squatted on the fireplace rug to pet the dog.

She was in slacks and yellow sweater, and she looked unhappy, and a little tired, and still somehow much younger than her thirty years. I did my No. 14, Breezy Smile, for her, and Khan was watching her with drowsy amber eyes.

“But Johnny, why? What made her break with Bart and run away like that?”

“Look, honey lamb, it’s pretty obvious. She’d had a fight with him about the test. That was last week, but then this Pardo guy came up and propositioned her. She had the sense to turn him down; she even told him that her boy friend would object. But just the same, it must have bothered her. I don’t suppose she got much sleep, that Wednesday night, and all day Thursday she’d be working herself up into a stew. She had a dinner date with Bart that night, and asked Doc Wittels if she might leave early for it, but around four-thirty she decided that she’d had enough, that Bart would never let her be a movie star. She sent the wire, and kept both Ray and Kathy at arm’s length, and packed her bathing suit—she figured she’d feel better if she blew herself a trip to Palm Springs or La Jolla. She must’ve had some mad money saved up, or hocked the necklace if she didn’t have. By now she’s had three days to think it over, and the chances are she doesn’t want to lose her job. That means she’s likely to be back tonight.”

Khan sneezed, politely, and got up, and walked majestically over to the desk. He stared at me across the breakfast tray and swept his whiplike yellow tiger tail. I tossed a scrap of bacon to him and he trotted off with it into the kitchen, where a dog with manners is supposed to eat. The little woman said: “It’s funny Dr. Wittels didn’t notice.”

"Notice what? He noticed she had something on her mind all right."

"I mean about the telegram. She must've sent it from his office, right under his nose."

"He'd never notice that. He'd have been working on a patient, and she could have scribbled it, and pushed the Western Union buzzer for a messenger, and met him in the hall. Or she could have excused herself and phoned it in. There'd be a pay phone in the ladies' room."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I guess that's right. But we're still stuck with it. Until she actually shows, we can't afford to let it go at that."

"I think we can."

"Johnny, you don't! The way you say that, you're not even trying to kid me, and surely not yourself. I know you've had a feeling all along there's something wrong, and so have I. And we've already wasted so much time. . . ."

I glowered at my scratch-pad notes and rubbed my jaw. The excavated molar had begun to nag at me again; it was developing a tolerance for all the aspirins I'd slugged it with since we came home that were still singing in my ears and busily converting into cotton wool what I'd been using for a mind.

"Let's see if we've still got a client," I suggested wearily, and pulled the phone across the blotter with my foot.

Dick Cross was not at home, his Chinese butler told me at the beach house down at Malibu. I tried his formal residence in Beverly, his ranch near Woodland Park and finally caught up with him at the Bel Air, just as he walked into the locker room. He sounded like a man who'd licked Bing Crosby on the eighteenth hole and

for a hundred dollars Nassau. "Ah there, hawkshaw, glad to hear you made it. I've been just a mite concerned about you lovely people. What's the word?"

"If we'd been ostriches," I said, "we couldn't possibly have laid a bigger egg."

He listened to me telling it, and made the proper cheerfully commiserating noises. "Well, that's not so bad. The next safari you get up, you'd better count me in—sounds like you had a lot of fun. This Miss Anonymous you liberated, did I hear you say she claimed to be an actress, God forbid?"

"You know me, Dick," I said. "I don't use dirty words, except when quoting for the sake of accuracy."

"That's my boy. But then again, one never knows, maybe her mother dropped her on her head when she was just a baby. I better call my lawyers and get her out of stir. Us dirty words have got to stick together."

"Sucker!" I applauded him. "About the Hendrix gal, you want me to keep blundering around? The trail is three days cold, and you can see the chances are she'll turn up by herself."

He thought about it, whistling tunefully. "It looks that way," he granted me, almost reluctantly. "Know something, John? What bothers me a little is that she and Bart may have gone Hollywood on us."

I didn't laugh or anything. It is a fact that in this cock-eyed town a pretty girl can still attract publicity by cooking up a disappearance or amnesia routine. The telegram, the ring, the story of the screen test blocked by Bart, his alcoholic demonstrations of despair, they'd fit exactly in that pattern, just a set of phony props, as corny as a barbershop quartet. If that was how it was, the news would break on Monday morning's front page and in

half a dozen syndicated movie columns, planted there by an experienced and slightly cynical "public relations" hack.

"Could be," I said. "Our Mr. Nichols struck me as the boy who might go in for stuff like that. He's got a history which points that way, and he's a trifle unreliable. We even caught him pitching woo at the O'Neal girl, Friday night."

Dick Cross sounded surprised, and just a little shocked. "You saw him? At the party?"

"In his car. He took her home, and we were waiting for her there."

". . . People are hard to judge. Maybe you'd better talk to him, hawkshaw. Just check the script and find out where he stands. If it's a stunt, it's after all a pretty harmless one, but we've a right to know what's going on. I don't want Leslie or her portrait to appear in this."

I told him that seemed fair enough to me, and we would check the script for him, immediately if not sooner. It is these little, unimportant promises you make on Sunday afternoon, when you should read the funny papers or be weeding the petunia bed, that cause you all the grief.

From Crescent Terrace, the ocean was very much visible now. It glittered in a garish, angrily insistent color scheme of blue and orange, fighting off the rapidly declining sun. On the horizon there hung still a wisp or two of cumulus, but of the past week's rains no other sign remained. The steady western breeze was dry as dust, and getting chilly fast; the canyon's dirt-brown mat of withered sagebrush looked as dull and shabby as a beggar's coat. A brace of sea gulls came volplaning

in, shrilly inquisitive, and zoomed across the Packard's hood as we turned off the road into the Nichols motor yard.

The triple carport harbored only the Cadillac brougham, splashed with dried-out mud. Viewed from outside, the glass-brick studio appeared to have an air of flashiness and artificial vivacity; it was an even bigger structure than I could recall, and gaudier, like one of those tall Texas beauties in a Billy Rose revue, done up in war paint and a couple of strategically tacked-on flower sprays. The dog went loping up to it ahead of us and sniffed the pink hibiscus on its front porch, warily.

The double front door, sheeted in aluminum, displayed a knocker of black plastic molded like a spatula. I tried to use it, touched the door and felt it move away from me. Someone had overlooked to set the latch.

Inside, someone had swept the parquet floor, and tidied up the model stage. Light filtered dimly through the skylight's closed Venetian blinds. A vague stale smell of smoke and people still persisted, but the buffet serving table had been cleared away, the bamboo corner bar cleaned off, the cocktail laundromat evicted. The buxom nude continued to adorn one pale-gray composition wall, but Leslie Cross's picture wasn't there. The room gave me a funny feeling, as if no one lived there any more. Khan pushed in past my hip and trotted down the parquet with a clattering of toenails on the wood. He caught a whiff of something, froze abruptly in his tracks and made a noise somewhere between a snort and a half-startled growl.

The little woman grabbed my arm. "Johnny, what's wrong?"

I shook my head and listened carefully. There was no

sound except the muffled grumbling of the surf. The dog stood motionless and silent, staring at the bedroom corridor.

"Stay put here, cherry pie," I said, and strode across the parquet to the corridor in sixteen long, quick hol-lowly percussive steps.

The master bedroom wasn't quite so tidy as the studio. Its door stood wide ajar, its lights were burning yellowly against drawn window shades. It showed the amiable disarray of casual undressing and retirement: clothes dropped here and there, the bedspread wadded in a ball, a towel dumped on the commode. Bart Nichols lay across the bed, flat on his back, both arms flung wide as if in supplication, feet and legs dangling below the edge. The feet wore plain black leather slippers. The rest of him looked cold, and sallow, and extremely dead.

I grunted, felt my hands squeeze into fists, and stood stock-still there, on the threshold, studying the scenery. The sight of death is not a very pleasant one, but there is nothing like four years of war and six of puttering around in the detective business to get you used to it. I'd seen a few of those I'd liked a lot less well. This one was not so bad—there was no blood at all, no real messiness, 'no insects yet, and not much of a smell. RM seemed almost gone, the way his legs hung loose, and on his stomach was a patch of skin already turning blue. He had been gone at least since late Friday night.

The crumpled telegram lay on a pillow, near his finger tips. The portrait of Jean Hendrix smiled upon him from the wall, uncertainly, expectantly.

A board creaked lightly in the corridor behind me, and the little woman's clear soprano asked me: "Darling, what . . ."

"I told you to stay put. This time you do, or else."

"But you're just standing there. Is he asleep or drunk?"

I swung around and rode her back into the studio. She saw my face and caught her breath. "Oh *no!*"

"Looks like a heart attack," I said.

". . . The phone is over there. Want me to call an ambulance?"

"Not yet. You just sit down until I'm through. And keep that dog from under foot."

Khan was abandoning his bristling pose and sidling to the corridor. She called him back and slapped his grim black snout, and meekly settled with him on the model stage. I practiced on them with my No. 27, Dubious Approval, and went back to adding up the score.

Young men of twenty-eight can have a heart attack like anybody else. Maybe they had rheumatic fever as a child, or took their high-school football coach too seriously at his word. A high-strung artist, living mostly on emotions and on alcohol among the clouds of cuckoo land, would make as good a prospect as you'd find. There was a highball tumbler on the dresser, still half-full of a brownish liquid; when I sniffed at it, the tart aroma of stale bourbon clawed into my nose. The crystal ashtray next to it was loaded to the brim. Most of the butts on top were Parliaments, a brand I'd watched him smoke, but buried under those there would be many others—mine, and Dick's, and Kathy's, and a whole lot more that had been left by people picking up their coats.

The bathroom looked all right. It was a little warm, because the built-in radiant heater had been left switched on, but nothing seemed to be disturbed. His toothbrush

glass had water in it, and the brush itself lay on the lavatory by an open tube of toothpaste—that would indicate he'd been about to use them when the fellow with the scythe knocked on the door. He'd made it back into the bedroom, just in time to hit the sack.

I leaned into the bathroom entrance, reconsidering. It didn't have to be that way. Snap judgment doesn't pay, not when you're saddled with that kind of grim responsibility.

There was the little matter of the darkroom door.

On Friday night, I'd opened it myself, and peeked behind, and closed it carefully. Now it was open at a crack. Bart Nichols would have had no business in there. Of course some other guest that night might have been curious, or plain confused. . . .

I nudged it with my toe and snooped inside again. Light from the bedroom shimmered on the tiles. My pencil flash bounced off the metal sink, reflected in the glassware, swept along the row of bottles on a shelf. There were a lot of them in different sizes, all meticulously classified and labeled, evenly aligned. The labels bore the imprint of a leading firm in photographic supplies.

The flashlight beam picked out the only bottle that was slightly out of plumb and focused on the label, not quite steadily.

I grunted once again and backed into the bedroom, sniffed the highball glass once more and squinted at Bart Nichols with a frown. His droopy black mustache seemed to twitch upwards in sardonic mockery; the shell-rimmed glasses only served to warp his vacant stare.

Suzy glanced up when I returned, and tried a trou-

bled smile on me. "Did you find out?"

"I'm not a doctor, honey lamb. And even he will need an autopsy."

"But isn't it . . . What were you looking for?"

I shrugged and said: "Don't know myself. Maybe it fazes me a little, finding the poor guy after two days, with no one bothering to call on him before. Oh, by the way, there seems to be some possibility of suicide."

She winced and bit her pretty lips. "How can you tell?"

"I can't, for sure. He had some stuff there handy, and a drink I don't much like the smell of. I'll phone Dave and ask him to drop by. He can take over, and he'll get us off the hook. . . . Now what's that dog been chewing on?"

Khan cocked a guilty amber eye at me. He had been worrying at something small and tough between his paws. I pried his fierce black muzzle open and removed a piece of leather, brown and narrow and three inches long, with metal rivets on each end. The little woman took it from my hand and puzzled over it. "He must've found that on the floor. Right here, where we've been waiting. It's a heelstrap, isn't it? Off someone's shoe?"

"That's just what I'm afraid it is."

She gave it back to me, reluctantly. "What's wrong with it?"

". . . I'm glad you asked me that. Because I've pitched a lousy game of ball these past two days, and maybe now I can make up for it a bit. Okay, strike one: this is a heel-strap, off somebody's shoe. A loafer sandal type, about size 10. Last Friday's party was a formal one, so that rules out the guests. Your host wore evening dress himself, and after that a pair of strapless black moroc-

cos. The servants were a bunch of Filipinos, hired for the night. They'd wear those narrow, pointed pumps, in a much smaller size, and incidentally, they swept the floor before they left. Strike two: this place here where you're sitting happens to be in a direct line between the bedroom corridor and the front door. A fellow in a hurry would be liable to take a running jump across the corner of the stage. Strike three and out: we've met somebody recently who owns a pair of loafer sandals, one of them having a defective strap."

"I don't remember that." She really sounded puzzled now. "Who was it, Johnny? Where does he come in?"

I shook my head at her and juggled with the phone. Lieutenant David Hogan, Sheriff's Confidential Squad, would be at home and cleaning out the brooder on his little chicken ranch in Juanita Canyon. I got his widowed sister who kept house for him and talked her into dragging him out of the yard.

His testy Irish basso sounded out of sorts with me. "Now listen, buddy, this is Sunday afternoon. I got to work six days a week, twenty-four hours a day, for what the county pays me, but on Sundays I ain't got to put up with no monkeyshines from guys like you. If it's about that dame you're chasing . . ."

"It's about a man," I said. "With maybe fifty grains of cyanide in him."

". . . see me at my office in the morning, after nine o'clock," he sputtered on, then made a noise as if he'd swallowed something. "What was that again?"

"You heard me, Dave," I said.

"What number are you calling from?" he asked me cagily.

I chuckled for him, rubbed my jaw and said: "Now

look, it's not that kind of deal. We don't need prowler cars, and reporters, and the duty squad from Central Homicide. If that's the way you want to handle it, I'll call my client first, and everybody will wind up waist deep in corporation lawyers."

His groan came all the way from here, and would have cracked an alligator's heart. "I should of known. Another movie cover-up." He put an adjective in there that almost fused the wires.

"It's not as bad as that," I told him peacefully. "The setup looks a little funny, but my guess would be he stepped out by himself. The trouble is, there's been too much publicity to tie him in with twenty million dollars' worth of stars, and with a picture just about to be released."

He thought about it for a while. "I got two Brahma hens that's coming down with limber-neck," he grumbled. "But I'll pick up Doc McKenzie and we'll be right over. If it comes up tails, so help me, somebody is gonna swing for it. I don't give a damn if it's Hedy Lamarr."

I reeled off the address for him and offered sweetly: "Do you want the only reasonable suspect, Dave?"

Ray Summerhill sat on a kitchen chair under the fading skylight, in the middle of the parquet floor. The clean-cut V his hard young features made was pale and stiffly set below its tan. He'd shaved that day, and put on a clean shirt and plastered back his shock of corn-blond hair. But he had trouble managing his cigarette, and behind slitted lids his eyes were shot with blood, and fixed upon his knees.

"You guys are nuts," he told us grittily.

I snapped the wall switch for the chandelier. The little

woman was still holding court among the pillows of the model stage. The dog lay at her feet, poised like a lion, gravely interested, pointed ears alert. Lieutenant David Hogan cozily straddled another chair, his chin reposing on one arm he'd folded on its back. He was a short and stocky specimen of fairly well preserved late middle age, dressed carelessly in farmer's khaki, with a farmer's bushy brows and corrugated leather skin.

"Could be," he placidly agreed.

I rinsed my treatment filling in Bart Nichols's alcohol: a dose of rye, from a fresh bottle on the bar. "Come off it, youngster," I suggested. "Don't you know you can't fight City Hall? We've got the goods on you, but cold—that strap came off your shoe, we found it in this room, and you still had it Friday night around 8:30, when we were in your apartment. What's the use of trying to deny you lost it here?"

"You guys are nuts."

The little woman frowned at him and patted Khan's coarse tawny hide. "Oh, do be sensible," she said impatiently. "We're not accusing you of anything. Ray, can't you see, you're only making things look bad this way. Bad for yourself, that is."

"What was you doing here?" Dave Hogan asked, as mildly as a priest.

It was like talking back to one of those recordings on the phone: . . . *been disconnected. The number you have reached has been disconnected. The number you have reached you guys are nuts.* I shrugged and said: "He doesn't have to tell us, Dave. He's betting table stakes, and we hold all the cards."

"Could be. How'd he get in?"

"That was the easy part. The door was off the latch."

"It had been off all evening," said Suzy. "For the party. That broke up by ten, and Mr. Nichols left a little earlier. One of the girls had come alone, by taxi, and he drove her home. When he got back, the servants must have finished cleaning, and of course he let them go and went to bed. He'd had too many drinks and didn't bother to lock up."

"You've got the picture, Dave," I said. "Miss Hendrix disappeared the night before. This youngster had a crazy notion that Bart Nichols was responsible. We questioned him about it, and he lost his nerve, but afterwards he must've started brooding and decided he'd see Bart and put it up to him. We'll soon find out what happened when he did."

The stocky sheriff's officer ignored us pointedly. His chin stayed on his arm, his soberly impassive, clear blue eyes remained in rigid focus on Ray Summerhill. "Ex-con," he said reflectively. It sounded like a sanitation man discussing garbage. "Big shot. A real sharp cooky. Figures he's been smart. There's fifty thousand like him in this county, on account of they like the climate, every one of 'em as smart as he turned out to be. Last week there's one that pulls a heist down on Cahuenga, at a filling station. Fogs a colored man that tries to stop him, gets away with twenty bucks. He drops his hat that's got his name inside the band. Turns out he has a phone, the rookie on the beat just looks it up in the directory and puts the arm on him. Oh yeah, they make it tough for us." His free hand dipped into his pocket and produced the crumpled telegram. He smoothed it out and reached across with it, and beckoned at me with his chin. I put my drink back on the bar and seized Ray's arm below the elbows, pinning them behind his chair.

He read the telegram—he had to read it, it was right before his eyes. He almost jerked me off my feet. I slammed him back into the chair and got a thumb hold on his wrists.

“Okay already,” Hogan said, and pocketed the wire. “Suppose you pass the gravy, punk. What was you doing here?”

“You—guys—are—nuts!”

The little woman sighed. Khan sneezed and dropped his head between his paws. The bedroom door banged shut, and from the corridor emerged a weedy, glum-faced man who lugged a heavy suitcase and a dapper roly-poly man who trotted on his heels and swung a small black bag. They put their luggage on the model stage and stood together, watching us expectantly, as if they were a team of vaudeville comedians we’d promised to audition. “What’s the damage, Doc?” Hogan inquired without much interest. He kept his eyes on Ray, unswervingly.

The jolly little man released a pleasantly good-humored chuckle. He’d have been better cast as Santa Claus than as a coroner’s physician, but the thought of that would never have occurred to him. His full black spade beard was immaculately trimmed, his double-breasted tweeds were custom built, his silk foulard boasted a diamond pin and painted butterflies. He ogled Suzy’s sweater openly, and with an interest distinctly unprofessional.

“No way to tell,” he mentioned cheerfully. “It could be natural. We’ll have to take a ride downtown with him.”

The glum-faced man performed a grimace, jiggling ashes off the cigarette stuck to one corner of his lips.

"Too late to catch the smell," he said regretfully.

"When did it happen?" Hogan asked them carelessly.

The bearded little doctor said: "Oh, Friday night sometime. Do better for you later on, when you find out what time he had his dinner."

I glanced at his companion, jerked a thumb at Ray and looked significantly at my hands. The glum-faced man sniffed his contempt. "Sure, sonny boy was here," he said. "That walnut panelwork in there takes prints like glue. He must of stumbled when he walked into the room, and touched the wall. I tried the doorknobs, but they're smeared."

"What's with that bottle?" Hogan asked.

"Potassium cyanate, Lieutenant. The worst there is, and any photo store'll sell it to you with no questions asked. It's used for bleaching bromide positives; I got enough of it myself down at the lab to slip a dose to everyone in Hollywood. The bottle's smeared, though—it's been handled lots of times, but I can't do a thing with it."

"You check the glasses?"

"Yeah, they're printed, both of them. The highball and the mouthwash in the bathroom. Just this dead guy handled 'em."

"But surely you've found out if they've been poisoned?" Suzy challenged him. "If Mr. Nichols was the only one to touch them, wouldn't that be proof he was a suicide?"

The glum-faced man jiggled more ashes off his butt and sneered at her. "Lady, I got some samples here," he said, and tapped his suitcase. "Care for me to try one on that dog of yours?"

"You've missed the gimmick, honey lamb," I said.

"That bitter-almond scent you've read about evaporates, and pretty fast. Now it takes blood tests, and a lot of chemical analysis. And you forget a drink can easily be poisoned without handling it."

The bearded little doctor had a twinkle for her in his eye. He picked a speck of dust off his lapel and made inspection of his manicure. "If cyanide was used," he told us chipperly, "it wasn't in the drink."

We all stared back at him except Ray Summerhill, who'd slumped into his chair when I released his arms.

"That right?" said Hogan, halfway interested now. "How come you think so, Doc?"

"Or in the mouthwash either, for that matter. There's no lipmark on the bathroom glass. He had just filled it, getting set to brush his teeth. Which means to me he was through drinking, for the night."

I saw his point, but clearly and immediately. It was a pretty nifty sample of forensic reasoning he'd pulled on us, and probably not strong enough to persuade a jury, but for working purposes it made a lot of sense. A man who gets his toothbrush out, at night, has made a certain psychological adjustment. No matter what the day has done to him, he's ready to retire. He does not necessarily stop thinking, but his body chemistry has closed up shop, his palate wants no further stimulant. He may still be engulfed by sudden waves of black despondency and reach for poison on the nearest shelf, but chances are he won't use whisky for a mixer.

In the Nichols case, of course, the stuff might easily have found its way into that highball earlier, before its victim went about his bathroom chores. But all the cyanides are poleax killers—take a sip and you'd have barely time for putting down the glass.

I put my own down on the bar and rubbed my jaw, reflectively for once. Somewhere in all that hollow space between my ears the spark of an idea had sprung to life.

"Let's get this straight," I said. "The way we stand right now, without an autopsy, you can't be sure of anything. But you're inclined to guess he had a heart attack."

The bearded little man gave me his twinkling smile. "I never guess," he promised me. "There are so many possibilities. And cyanide is tricky business. We had a case last year where someone took it in a malted milk, right at the soda counter. He paid his check, and walked two blocks back to his office, and dropped dead into his secretary's lap. The milk had sealed his stomach tissues for a while."

The tiny spark between my ears was flaring up. I didn't like what it was showing me at all. The picture it illuminated wasn't pretty, and it wasn't clear. There were too many holes in it, too many question marks; it was no more than just a bright idea, a fairly nasty one, conceived and sponsored by a nasty mind such as for instance mine. "Quick Watson, the needle," I said, not feeling very humorous about it. "Where's his dinner jacket, Doc?"

The coroner's gay twinkle now was merely quizzical. The glum-faced man fired up another butt and curled his lip for me. "In there," he told me. "On the floor."

"Go through his pockets?"

"Sure I did. The usual. Watch, key chain, silver pencil, hankie, lighter, billfold with a couple of hundred bucks. Handful of vitamins, all kinds. This dead guy must've used a lot of 'em—there's boxes in his closet with a big supply." He saw my face and scowled. "Hey, how'd you know about that, fella?"

"Saw him eat them. Did you wrap them up, the ones he carried?"

"Yeah, they're here." He tapped his suitcase. "Just routine. That junk's okay, the factories are careful with it. Pills and capsules—can't do any harm."

"Mind showing us?"

He glanced at Hogan, who'd removed his eye from Ray and was now cynically watching me. Suzy said quickly, breathlessly: "Please, Dave, we've got to *know*."

"Could be. What's your opinion, Doc?"

". . . It's technically possible. A phony capsule would mean homicide, of course. If that were used, the gelatin would certainly delay the action of the drug, perhaps as much as twenty minutes."

"That your angle, Johnny?" Hogan said.

I nodded, half-sincerely, and he shrugged and gestured to the glum-faced man, who snorted at me and unlocked his kit. The glassine envelope he took from it contained four small white pills, four yellow ones, two oval crimson capsules and one oblong heavyweight in bottle green. He shook them out into a dish of porcelain and handled them with tweezers, peering at them through a lens. "No punctures," he declared. "'Course there's the big one that's supposed to come apart."

"That's folic acid," said the little doctor, worrying his beard. "A liver-iron compound, beefed up with B₁₂. For sale at any drugstore. You'd better open it."

They fussed with it together, briefly, and the capsule split into two equal halves. It yielded half a dozen grains of coarse white powder, glittering under the light. "Don't look so good," the glum-faced man said cagily. He put his nose to it, about two feet away, and sniffed with gingerly discretion. "Well, for . . ." he snapped,

and caught the little woman's eye. "Excuse me, ma'am," he wound up sheepishly.

Lieutenant Hogan turned back to Ray Summerhill and raked him with a glare you could have rented to a polar bear.

"You a photographer?"

This time the boy tried hard to put up a front. He jerked himself erect and ground a twitching fist into his thigh. His tense young features were the color of his shirt; his gritty voice almost cracked up on a falsetto note. "So what?"

"He's got a darkroom at his place," I said reluctantly. "He knew Bart Nichols fairly well—they worked together on a picture, recently. I guess that means he knew about Bart's vitamin addiction, too."

"Let's have it, punk," said Hogan, raking him again. "You figured Nichols grabbed your girl. You queered a couple of them pills and sashayed over here on Friday night and raised a breeze with him—enough so you could slip 'em in his pocket. He'd hit the jug, and maybe you was canned a little, but you knew the score all right. You figured it'd pass for suicide. That how it was?"

"You guys are nuts!"

The boy got to his feet and kicked the chair aside. For possibly three seconds he stood up to us, wide-eyed, defiant, shoulders hunched, fists cocked to strike. Then, with a shudder, he let go and toppled to the floor. His head bounced off the parquet, jarringly.

Nobody seemed to be exactly in a hurry to look after him. The little coroner just winked at me, contributing a merry chuckle. Suzy was watching me intently and in obvious dismay. The dog had gone to sleep and

snored between his paws. The glum-faced man was back at work with lens and tweezers, mumbling to himself.

"Now ain't that something," Hogan said. "One for the book. A private jack who beats us at our game and puts the finger on a killer." He did not sound especially amused.

My excavated tooth flamed up again. I dug a thumb into my cheek and winced at him. That bright idea I'd had looked like a pipe dream now. But even pipe dreams can be checked sometimes. "You need us any more?"

"What for? You done your part. Drop over in the morning and we'll catch up on the paper work."

"They're smeared," the glum-faced man complained to no one in particular. "Smeared bad."

The bearded coroner was talking on the phone. The little woman said: "Dave, what about that boy? I think he hurt himself. What do you plan to do with him?"

"Listen, don't waste your sympathy. They go to college up in Quentin, they learn all the angles. We seen this act so many times, it don't get laughs from us no more. We're gonna book him at the Hall right now. Material witness, till we find the store that sold them pills to him."

"You'll keep the story under wraps?" I asked him urgently. "Until my client can get organized?"

He would have grinned for me if he'd remembered how. "The lid is on," he promised me.

We were already at the door when he came stalking after us. "I got to take a statement from this Hendrix babe. You better bring her in."

The way I stared at him must have been pretty odd. His cynically disapproving, clear blue eyes did not ap-

pear to notice it. "But she's still missing, Dave," the little woman challenged him.

"Well, dig her up," he told us carelessly. "You got a client, don't you? You was hired to do the job. Oh yeah, I clean forgot, you asked about the heap. Statistics says she picked up a citation, Thursday night. One of our prowlies flagged her down at Figueroa and Marquette, for going through a light. I tried to phone you yesterday, but you was out of town."

This time I nearly pulled a faint myself.

"... You're sure? It was her car, and she was driving it? What time on Thursday night?"

His bushy brows went up at me. He fished his notebook out and thumbed it through. "Black Plymouth coop, 15AX565, Miss Jean Alicia Hendrix. Failure to halt for intersection signal. Vehicle's brakes inadequate. Road surface slick, poor visibility, offender's attitude co-operative. Citation issued by Car 44, Deputy M. R. Jones. Time 7:35, November 21. That sure enough for you?"

I snapped the leash back on the dog and rubbed his sharply pointed ears. I didn't dare to look at Hogan any more.

"It sounds all right," I said. "Thanks very much. We'll find her for you, Dave."

8

OUTSIDE the sun was a thin fiery slice of scarlet, getting ducked in the horizon's restless indigo. The ocean breeze had freshened briskly and was carrying a sting of rotting kelp, dry beach sand and the fumes of Diesel truck exhausts. Headlights were flashing in an endless stream along the San Francisco highway, at the bottom of the cliff. A flight of fighter jets came tearing in from the Pacific, ripping up the air space overhead. The early winter evening seemed full of rowdy life.

The Packard's motor balked at me before it would obey the starter. It backfired noisily in second gear, coasting downhill to Sunset Boulevard. There was a drive-in at the corner of Valhalla Parkway, and I drifted into that and ordered mushroom soup and scrambled eggs. The little woman shook her auburn curls and kept her eyes fixed on the windshield, stubbornly.

"You disapproving of me, sugar doll?"

"I'm just not hungry. I suppose you did the best you could."

"Well, gee, that's nice. I hoped you would."

"Oh, Johnny, don't be silly now. This thing's in such a frightful mess."

"I guess it is, at that."

She laid a nervous hand on mine that was relaxing on the steering wheel. "What are you thinking of? What can we do?"

“What’s thinking?” I inquired. “How does it go? Seems like I don’t remember any more.”

We sat in silence for a while. My supper came, and tasted like a bowl of slop. The dog squeezed in his head between us from the rear seat, sniffed at it and whined cajolingly. I crammed the mushroom soup down the left side of my mouth and let him have the eggs.

“Of course,” I said, “you realize this Nichols murder isn’t any of our business. The way it happened, on the face of it, there is no reason to assume that Jean’s involved. It’s pretty obvious Ray Summerhill did not come up here Friday night just to be sociable. These past four months he’d built up quite a head of steam, and it’s a cinch our visit added fuel to the fire. That’s just too bad for everyone concerned, but in the last analysis it doesn’t make much difference. The fact that he went to see Nichols and did what he did has no bearing on Jean’s disappearance at all. For all we know, that part of it is still the same. She packed her bathing suit and went away. She couldn’t have foreseen this kind of consequence. She may be back at home right now.”

“But darling, why in Heaven’s name . . . What was she doing in that funny neighborhood, last Thursday night?”

I pursed my lips at her and said: “We can find out. It doesn’t have to mean something. Marquette leads into Highway 89, which is a good alternate route to San Diego, Palomar and the Borrego Valley. If she happened to be hunting for some desert sunshine and a swimming pool.”

“We could use some of that ourselves,” the little woman pointed out and shivered in her furs. “We’ll never get it sitting here and arguing.” She whipped her feet out

on the tarmac, slammed the door and clicked away towards the phone booth, walking quickly with a graceful and deceptively vivacious swagger.

I watched her from behind my No. 15, Foolish Grin, and blinked my lights to call the car hop with the check. I didn't really want to pay it, or to use the phone, or find out anything. That pipe dream stuff looked pretty sick by now. There were too many flaws in it, too many quirks, too many horrors. I cursed Doc Wittels and his treatment filling and my own impulsiveness and lack of solid wits. I wondered how I'd stuck it out in my profession for six years, and why. I wondered if the Army could be talked into a job for me.

"No word from Jean," said Suzy in my ear.

"That so? It's only six o'clock."

She climbed back in and bit her lip for me. "I talked to Kathy about Bart. She took it very well. Of course it was an awful shock to her."

"Maybe you shouldn't have," I said.

"Oh, Johnny, honestly, you can be such a goon! Did you really expect me to hush, and let her get the news from Dave or read it in the paper? She was crying like a baby, if you're interested, but she pulled herself together when I told her we were following another lead on Jean. She wants to come along—I promised we'd drive by and pick her up."

"Women," I said, halfheartedly contemptuous, and stomped my foot down on the starter button. "If it's all the same with you, I'm going back to school and study dentistry."

We rolled back into town on Sunset, dodging bumpers through the cocktail hour traffic: Brentwood, Westwood, Beverly, the Strip. Too many drunks, too many

crazy kids in hot-rod rigs, too many fancy blondes in Cadillac convertibles. Too many drugstores selling vitamins. The mushroom soup was curdling in my craw. I kept my mouth shut tight and the speedometer at thirty-five. At Normandie a loaded city bus cut in on me and blocked the turn; a taxi skidded on the trolley rails and slewed around, brushed past my radiator, forced me back into the center lane. Traffic behind me raised a noisy blare of horns; a motor cop came snarling up and waved me on. It was a well-remembered block; the corner store from where I'd phoned Sam Levy, Friday night, the cabstand and the newsboy were all there. The Coliseum Theater blazed with red neon and its marquee proclaimed NEXT WEDNESDAY WORLD PREMIERE, KNIGHT ERRANT, RICHARD CROSS. NOW SHOWING, BROADWAY CAVALCADE, MARK ARCHER, DOROTHY ROMAINÉ. I gawked at it and almost hit the motor cop. There wasn't anything to do except drive right on by.

Two more right turns put us on Normandie and at the Byron Arms. Kathy O'Neal came running down the driveway from the rear, her sleek brown permanent blown ragged by the wind. The knitted navy sweater and matching slacks she wore boasted too much about her curves. She gripped my hand with both of hers; the warm bright hazel eyes were very wide and anxious, the pupils big and black and clear. She'd put mascara on, and probably used drops to fix the damage of her tears. "Oh, Mr. Marshall—*John!* I've been so *terribly* upset. . . ."

I held the Packard's door for her and told her I was sorry, but she clung to me as if we'd climbed the roof. "All day I've tried and tried to get Bart on the phone. If I had only realized . . ."

"There wasn't anything you could've done."

"He's really . . . gone? They couldn't save him any more?"

"The stuff he took, he must have died in twenty seconds flat," I said.

She whimpered and released my hand and got into the car, unsteadily. "That awful Ray! I *knew* he'd make a mess. Jean will be simply *wretched*!"

"What was she after down in Negrotown last Thursday, Miss O'Neal?" I asked.

"I've no *idea*! I don't . . . that is, it really sounds too queer for *words*. We've neither of us ever been down there before, as far as I recall." She grasped the little woman's hands, excitedly. "I thought you said we could find out?"

"We're just about to try it, honey," Suzy told her soothingly.

I grunted, slid behind the wheel again and slapped the Packard into gear. We had the show back on the road and rolling south on Normandie to Wilshire, east on Wilshire to downtown Los Angeles. The girls were chattering together in an undertone; the dog snored peacefully in the tonneau. I snapped the radio on and got a music station with Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker ballet. There was less traffic by that time—the cocktail crowd was bending elbows now instead of fenders, but it still was quite a longish ride. They have some streets out here that run for thirty miles.

The dashboard clock said 7:20 when I pulled into the curb. The radio was playing a selection from *Peer Gynt*. I switched it to the sheriff's station, listened to a lot of other people's troubles and surveyed the local scenery.

We had arrived a little early—fifteen minutes earlier

than Jean had made it Thursday night. But this was Sunday, and the rains were gone; the asphalt patchwork of the intersection glittered in my headlights, rough and dry. The signal she had skidded through hung boxed in wires above the trolley tracks and blinked at us complacently in sixty-second cycles, red to green to red.

There was one street lamp to the block, and very little else. This was apparently supposed to be a shopping district, but most store fronts had been boarded up and none of them showed light. The northeast corner was an empty lot, knee-deep in weeds and with a billboard advertising Lucky Strike. The other corners had a fly-blown grocery, a raffish-looking drugstore and a sandwich bar. On weekdays this would be a busy spot, but as we watched it there were never more than half a dozen cars. The sidewalks carried just a trickle of pedestrians, most of them bunched in quietly furtive groups of three or four, all of them colored, few of them in skirts.

The little woman touched my hand and glanced at me uncertainly. Kathy O'Neal said breathlessly: "But how . . . I mean, what can we *do*? It was three days ago, and there is nothing here. She must've been just passing by."

I grinned at her. It was a pretty doubtful sort of grin, because a toothache and a tricky set of problems and a nasty mind make for a pretty doubtful sort of man. "You two stay put," I said, "where I can keep an eye on you. This time I'll warm your fannies for you if you don't co-operate."

That didn't get me anything. They merely stared as if I'd worn my hat in church. The dog woke up and started scratching at the door. I slapped him down and

climbed out from behind the wheel on rubber legs. There was a sheriff's call box on the corner, opposite the sandwich bar, and not another phone in sight. Three elegant young bucks in salmon-colored gabardine and two-tone sport shirts saw me open it and drifted unobtrusively away from there.

"McManus!" said the call box phone, gruffly incurious.

"Is Forty-four on tap?" I said. "I'd like to talk to them."

"Who's this?"

I told him who, and he seemed irked with me. "You got a beef?"

"No, nothing's wrong."

"Lissen, you kidding me? Those boys are on patrol. You got no beef, what do you want 'em for?"

"I want them," I said wearily, "to help me check a pipe dream, Sergeant. If you'll just ask Lieutenant Kennedy at the dispatcher's office, please."

He snorted and hung up on me. I wandered back across the street and slipped behind the wheel again. The girls were watching me in silence now. Khan nudged my shoulder and produced a mournful whine. A truck went rumbling past; nobody seemed to patronize the sidewalks any more. From somewhere fairly close, a railroad engine's mellow threnody came drifting in to us. The radio wound up a hot-car bulletin and sent somebody to investigate a 309 in Lakewood Park. It cleared its throat and ordered harshly: "Forty-four, to Figueroa and Marquette, Code One. See the private officer."

Kathy O'Neal said brightly: "Oh, you've called the cops. . . ."

"That's right."

“But what can they . . . that is, whatever for?”

I grinned at her some more, but not by any means from feeling smug, or humorous, or pleased. It just seemed easier that way. The little woman frowned into her lap and said: “They sometimes ask you where you’re going when they write a ticket for you, honey.” She sounded tired and rather cross.

A pair of headlights sprang up in my driving mirror and closed in behind us fast. The prowler car must have been within a mile. It sizzled past and cut into the curb across a safety zone and pulled up on a dime, six yards ahead, a nice new steel-gray Ford sedan, the county seal embossed upon its panels. I blinked my spotlight at it and two tall young deputies in suntan uniforms climbed out. They were not looking for an argument, but in that neighborhood they had to go through the routine. The driver’s partner stayed behind, his back against the prowler car’s flank, presenting us one shoulder and a gun hand hooked into his cartridge belt. The driver put a flash on me and stalked me like a cat. His tone was very quiet, almost a confidential murmur. “License, please. . . .”

The flash played on my open wallet, probed into the back seat, paused a moment on the dog who growled at it. It touched the girls for half a second each and flickered off. “Okay, what’s on your mind?”

“Which of you boys is Jones?”

“. . . If you mean Marty Jones, he’s on the graveyard shift this week. Why do you want him, mister? What’s the pitch?”

I managed to suppress a sigh.

“He’s got some info on a tracer job,” I said. “Know where he lives?”

"Mister, the regulations say I couldn't tell you if I did. You wanna talk to Marty, see him at the station. Roll call at 11:45. Check with the sergeant, please." He hitched his belt and started moving off.

"Just tell me this," I asked him hurriedly. "Suppose you fellows catch a driver with bad brakes, how do you handle it?"

"You got bad brakes?"

"This other party did."

He snapped his flash back on and played it casually on the Packard's floor board. "Going by the book," he said, "we can impound your heap, unless you phone a tow yourself, or there's a serviceman around who'll fix it for you, on the spot." He pointed with his chin to where an all-night filling station occupied the lot next to the corner grocery. "That all you want?"

"Sounds like it's all you've got."

He left without another word. I pressed the starter, switched my headlights on and pulled out from the curb. Before I'd made the fifty yards across the intersection, Prowl Car Forty-four was two red pin points, half a mile away.

The filling station needed more than just a coat of paint. It could have used a sweeper, and a window washer, and a dozen light bulbs to replace the ones that had burned out. It advertised an off-brand gas, sold from old-model pumps. Two tractor-trailer rigs, a moving van and an Express truck hugged the island, tanking up. A crudely lettered sign stuck in the window of the office shack announced MECHANIC ON DUTY.

I tapped my horn and pointed at the sign. The colored boy in overalls who had glanced up at me just shook his head and kept on servicing the moving van.

The driver of the truck came strolling over to me. "Got a match?" He peeked in at us while I held my dashboard lighter to his dead cigar. "You folks looking for Bill?"

"My brakes need fixing," I explained.

"Bill's down to supper," he informed me helpfully.

His arm swept vaguely down the block. I saw the yellow neon script that said JACOBY'S JOINT, and nodded to him, and let in my clutch.

It was a big, old-fashioned diner, set at catercorner to the street, and it was doing business. Its wedge-shaped parking lot was nearly filled. Apparently it was the kind of place that gets the high-school trade, the local workmen, the Diesel jockeys and the tourist strays. When I pushed in, the juke box was miraculously silent, but the crowd made up for that; the noise was well above the average produced by forty or fifty people eating. I didn't care too much for some of it. There was an odd metallic overtone, and there were tables with mixed white and colored couples, all of them too young, where the hilarity seemed just a trifle forced. The ventilation system needed exercise—the smoke, the smell of food and dime-store perfume would have choked a fairly strong giraffe.

My entrance caused a ripple of quick interest. A lot of heads were turned, a lot of faces froze into expressions of appraisal. The laughter and the noise fell off, then promptly came back up. The hard-faced blonde behind the cashier's desk gave me the beady eye. I made out not to notice and walked over to the counter where a man in grease-flecked Levis hunched across a plate of chicken stew.

"You the mechanic from next door?"

His grunt admitted it, without much cordiality. He was the oldest man I'd seen in months, rawboned, stoop-shouldered, with a skull as bald and wrinkled as a rotten apple, but his calloused, dirt-encrusted hands looked competent enough. He did not bother to neglect his meal for me. I took the next stool, ordered coffee, and dug into him. "You fix a lady's brakes last Thursday night, about this time?"

"Howzatagin?"

His thick bifocals swung around to me. Their flicker held no curiosity. I moved the needle back and turned the volume up. He got it now; he wiped some chicken gravy on a hunk of bread and popped it in between his dentures, chewed on it with relish, swallowed it and said: "Mebbe I did."

The mirror in back of the counter informed me that I was the object of attention from a weedy youth in polo shirt and houndstooth-checkered coat, who occupied a booth behind me by himself. He nursed a soda pop and drilled my kidneys with his glassy stare, machine-gun fashion, in short bursts. His small red pointed ears were flapping almost visibly. I let it go and asked the gaffer with the chicken stew: "What kind of car?"

"Howzatagin?"

"Now, Bill," I said good-naturedly. "You're not that deaf. You couldn't be and hold your job."

He saw my finger with Abe Lincoln's picture wrapped around it and laid down his fork, reluctantly. He stripped the five and smoothed it out and put it in his pocket, grabbed his fork again and speared a piece of stew. "Black Plymouth coop," he told me cheerfully. "A real crumb. Th' wrecker'udn't pay a saw fer it."

"You put those brakes back into shape?"

"Fer mebbe fifty miles. That's all th' lining she got left."

"You tell her that?"

"Dang sure I tell her. She don't care. She said she wasn't going far."

"She's pretty, isn't she?" I said. "You like those streamlined blondes?"

The kid behind me in the booth still flapped his ears, but now he had some company. Two boys in denim pants and high-school letter sweaters had moved in with him. They'd been discussing me, in whispers, and deciding I could be ignored. There was a furtive reaching back and forth under the table, and the visitors slunk off again. The old mechanic said: "Dang sure I like 'em. Trouble is, I cain't git any of 'em, at my age. Don't even look at 'em no more."

I rubbed my jaw and made a face. "You mean you didn't notice this one? She's a peacheroo!"

"Mister, it wuz raining pretty hard. . . ."

The kid behind me had another customer, the mirror said, a slim young Negro dressed in a dinner jacket, dark-blue ulster and a black Homburg. This time they caught me watching, and the pair of them almost upset their table getting out of there. They'd made it half across the diner when they saw I wasn't interested, so they altered course and disappeared behind the door marked *Gentlemen*.

"She mention anything to you where she was headed for?" I asked.

The old mechanic clicked his uppers, not impatiently but not especially impressed with me. My questions didn't worry him, and my five dollars didn't worry him—he was long past the stage where anybody could. He

didn't care a busted split pin's worth what it was all about. "Th' way I rec'llect, she warn't exactly gabby," he said dryly. "Seen her going out Marquette, I figure she'd be leaving town. Mebbe y'oughta ask this here young feller that wuz sitting right behind ye. Seen him talking to her while I fixed them brakes. High time you fellers git to stomping on his kinda racket."

It wasn't much of a surprise to me, but ice cubes started forming in my stomach anyway. I slapped his back for him and started for the washroom, tacking between tables, trying hard to make like just another guy.

I must have hammed the act, because my audience almost instantly gave me the bird. The first half-dozen steps I took met with complete and sudden silence, as if somebody had thrown a switch. The moment they were sure where I was going, half of them stampeded for the exit, while the other half struck up a pandemonium of boos and whistles, and of spoons on crockery. The washroom door flew open and the Negro with the Homburg dived out. He saw me coming, rolled his eyes at me and dived back in. The kid slipped past him, scuttled like a cockroach through the room and out of it into the kitchen. Dishes crashed around me, legs shot out to trip me up. Hands clawed at me and clutched my trench coat skirts. Somehow I kicked and straight-armed loose of them, plunged through the kitchen, dodged a butcher's knife tossed by the cook that would have cost him twenty years if I had really been a vice squad cop. The kid was running up the alley, and I pounded after him. I couldn't even see him, or the garbage cans I was caroming into, but his feet were striking wood, less than a hundred yards away. The moon broke from behind a cloud and showed him to me, on the very second he

had cleared the fence.

I scrambled over it myself and shouted at him, but he kept on going, racing through somebody's back yard, jumping hedges, skidding down another alley to the street. A vice squad cop would almost certainly have shot him dead. I didn't even have a gun on me. But I was older, smarter, better-trained and cleaner-living. I didn't need a gun. I caught him in the second alley, grabbed a handful of his shirt and shook him up a bit. He spat at me and tried to use his knees, but we were both of us too winded for a real brawl by then.

"Okay," I managed without gasping, finally. "Let's see the stash."

He called me something that would never pass the Johnston Code. I shook him up some more and put my pencil flash on him. Five-two, a hundred pounds, about eighteen and probably Caucasian, with a lot of long black greasy hair cut in a ducktail at the neck and parted all the way to there, right down the middle. Pale, unhealthy, acned skin, almost no lips or mouth and very little nose, eyes set too close, the pupils much too big, the irises a dingy blue. Clothes made to measure by a bootleg tailor, coat too long and pants too high and wide. Loud Argyle socks and sharply pointed anaconda shoes. A real mellow fellow. I put the flash away and leered at him, affectionately.

"Fork it over, gate!"

That naughty word again. I backhanded him lightly, shifted grip from shirt to collar, twisted him around. It's easier to frisk a man that way. He had it on his hip, high up, where other citizens might pack a pint. The crudely silver-plated case was almost just as big as that. It still had twenty fat brown cigarettes in it, with room

for anyway that many more. I slipped it in my pocket and said cozily: "So that was part of it. I guess it had to be."

He kicked me then. It was my fault, of course, but human nature is a funny business. You get excited, and a little overconfident. I'd figured that Professor Marshall had it made, and only needed now to bother about extra tricks. That didn't make my pipe dream any better than the ghastly nightmare it had started out to be, but now at least there was the chance of waking up from it.

Most probably the kid had sensed my shift in mood. He lashed out backwards with one heel and stamped on my right foot. He caught the instep, scored a yell on me and tore himself out of my grasp. I took off after him once more, teeth clenched in sudden rage and agony, only this time it was no deal. He hadn't broken anything—I could still limp along, but running was about as practical as flying through the air, like Superman.

I leaned against a lamppost, watching him burn up the street. My excavated molar started nagging me again, insistently, but my resentment was already feathering a prop. It didn't really matter any more; he wouldn't be too hard to find. And there was always Marty Jones, of Prowl Car Forty-four. My watch said 8:15—in just three hours and a half there would be Marty Jones.

9

JACOBY'S JOINT was closed and dark when I came limping round the block. The Packard was the only car left in its parking lot. I hadn't worried much about the ladies, not with Khan along by way of chaperon, but they themselves seemed to be out of sorts with me. The little woman sat behind the wheel and had the motor running and the lights turned on. "Johnny, for Heaven's sake, what are you up to now?"

"Not very much."

She looked at me as if I needed a psychiatrist and grudgingly moved over to make room for me. "What did you use, a tear gas bomb? This place came open at the seams!"

"Oh, that," I said. "That was two other guys."

The Packard's motor idled with a gentle purr. The dog stirred in the back seat, restlessly. The radio had Tony Martin, turned down low and whispering about true love unrequited. Kathy O'Neal said finally: "But did you . . . well, you know, the serviceman. Did he remember Jean?"

The little woman asked me: "What's the matter with your leg?"

"I stubbed my toe. The serviceman was there. He fixed her car. He claims she said that she wasn't going far."

"There isn't anywhere to go nearby," said Suzy, scornfully.

"I wouldn't know," I said. "Maybe there is. We'll go

and see. He claims she traveled east on 89, after she left his shop."

She moved aside and touched my trench coat pocket. "Darling, you're not . . . What is that?"

"Just something I picked up."

The silver-plated case looked even bigger, cruder and more questionable than it had to me before. The ladies puzzled over it together while I eased the Packard into gear and tooled it carefully out of the parking lot.

"Just something he picked up," the little woman said. Her tone was cold enough to chill an Eskimo.

Kathy O'Neal inquired uncertainly: "Are those expensive cigarettes?"

"Yeah, they're expensive," I assured her solemnly. "They retail for a buck apiece. Of course there isn't any tax on these, and the stuff that goes into them is cheaper than tobacco."

"I . . . I'm not sure I understand."

"They're jujus, honey," said the little woman. "Sticks of tea. Marijuana cigarettes. My clever husband bumped into a peddler and he shook him down. It was all right for him to take a chance like that, if he had fun with it, but I don't see why he is trying to be coy about it, at his age." She slipped the case into the glove compartment, found a Kleenex in her bag and ostentatiously wiped her hands.

That seemed to close the incident. We were already rolling eastbound on Marquette and making survey of the scenery. There were five blocks of tenements, most of them dark and in a bad state of repair. There was a railroad viaduct that spanned the street and carried the electric interurban to San Pedro and the harbor. The marker HIGHWAY 89 appeared, and there were lumber

yards, and junk yards, and a fertilizer plant. I speeded up to forty miles an hour and passed a few more trucks that labored up the grade. A traffic light turned red against me on the hilltop where another highway intersected ours. My headlights hit the signpost on it, pointing south and quoting LONG BEACH 26. Kathy O'Neal gasped at it in dismay.

"Oh, *stop!* I mean . . . that is . . ." She covered up her generous red mouth with both her hands.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, pulling off the road.

She looked as flustered and contrite as if we'd caught her with the cookie jar. "It's all my fault! That's where she's gone, of course, her aunt down at Long Beach! I *simply* didn't *think* . . ."

The little woman said: "I thought you told us that she had no family except some cousins up in Minneapolis."

"Oh, but Aunt Lucy isn't *really* . . . well, you know, Jean's mother was a friend of hers, and so they just *pretended* . . . But she's always kept in touch with us, and Jean would stay with her on her vacations, and on weekends, when she didn't have a date."

"Okay," I said. "Let's find a phone and call her up."

"But I don't know the number or the name!" she wailed. "It's Baxter or Dexter or something, if that's any help. I mean, I've been there once or twice, I think I could still find the place. . . ." She broke into a flood of tears on Suzy's neck.

"There are a quarter of million people living in Long Beach," I said. "But we've got lots of time. Maybe we'll play with it a little later on."

The traffic signal changed; the Packard rolled across the intersection and continued east on 89. Almost im-

mediately there were railroad crossings, and a switchyard, and another bunch of factories. They were in darkness, but a floodlight cluster half a mile ahead appeared to mark the site of one at work. The noise of it was audible almost that far away, a disorderly ruckus of banging and clanking and whistling in the night. A battered wooden fence enclosed its grounds, at least ten acres, most of it unpaved. The main gate fronted on the highway with a sign above it stating UNION IRON COMPANY, INC. The watchman's shack beside it seemed to have been recently constructed, of new redwood lumber with a whitewashed composition roof.

I drove on past it for a hundred yards or so and coasted to a halt. The road stretched out before me, plunging into open country; soon there would be barley fields and citrus groves, for many miles. We had three hours to kill, but there were better ways of killing them. She'd said she wasn't going very far. . . . I switched into reverse and sent the Packard whining back towards the gate.

"What are you looking for?" the little woman asked me curiously.

"You've got a question, cherry pie. I wish I knew myself."

Kathy O'Neal had dried her tears and stared at me in evident bewilderment. I parked and walked around the car towards the watchman's shack. It had a gas fire going and a field cot, and a punch clock near the door. A tall young husky in a Navy surplus jacket sat behind the table at the window, browsing through a Western pulp. When I strolled in he jumped and tossed the magazine aside, and sized me up behind a bristling scowl. It was so obvious I had surprised him and he didn't like the looks of me, I almost laughed out loud. You get accus-

tomed to a certain lack of understanding and good will, in my profession, but the week end had been singularly ill-supplied.

"Just passing by and saw your sign," I said. "The name's familiar somehow, but I can't put my finger on it. What kind of setup do you people have?"

He had to figure that one out. The way it must have sounded to him, either I was leading up to something or I had to be an easy rube, who could be slipped the big razzoo. He finally made up his mind to play it safe.

"Scrap metals plant," he said importantly. "Biggest in California."

"I'll bet it makes the biggest noise in California," I said. "How come you're operating Sunday night?"

"We're catching up on orders, buddy. What makes it any of your business?"

I smiled for him, my No. 7A, Bland Affability, and said: "Relax, my friend. It's not the company's affairs I'm interested in."

"Then whatcha doing here? I ain't supposed to letcha on the premises."

"It's just a personal inquiry. Were you here last Thursday night?"

I had my wallet out and folded back to show him and to pacify his mind, if any, but the gesture and my question hit him like a baseball bat. His scowl went all to pieces, and his ruddy country-boy complexion faded to a sickly gray. He backed away from me and started talking fast, as if his life depended on my being persuaded and indulging him. "Now listen, mister, whyncha tell me who you was when you come in? I got m'orders not to talk with strangers, dontcha see, if I'd of known I wouldn't of got rusty with you. Sure I was here on

Thursday, I been on this job for near two weeks now, it's defense work, dontcha see, essential industry, I guess I should of called the board and asked for a dee-ferment, is the way I hear, only the boss himself told me he'd fix it up legit. Maybe he ain't had time to fill them papers out. . . ."

It was the sort of thing that might have been as funny as a monkey with a hangnail, if I'd been disposed to be amused. I didn't even have to catch what it was all about—he hadn't actually taxed me in so many words with being from the FBI. There were a lot of them around like him, with draft board troubles, and I was fresh out of sympathy. "Oh, knock it off," I told him wearily. "You'll know it, youngster, when they throw you in the can. Just kick in with the answers, will you please? On Thursday night, around this time, was there a girl here in an old black car? She might have been in trouble of some kind, or she might possibly have pulled right in there through the open gate."

He got his color back, or most of it, but now his eyes were big and round like silver dollars, and about as bright. "You mean you don't . . ."

"To hell with what I don't. Let's have it, son—was she or wasn't she?"

". . . Mister, this ain't no place for girls. I never seen a skirt as long as I been on the job."

"Which isn't long," I said. "And you work nights. Not very hard, it seems to me."

"I didn't see no girl," he told me sullenly.

A nice new Chrysler station wagon left the highway and came sliding in towards the gate. It stopped under the window of the shack and honked at us, a single toot, politely summoning. The watchman jumped

again and hustled for the door, and ran into a shoulder block I threw his way. "Hey, that's the boss. . . ."

"I'll talk to him," I said.

He shambled out behind me anyway. The driver of the station wagon had a mildly disapproving gleam for us behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. He was the type who looked as if he took that gleam to bed with him at night, a man still in his thirties, nearly bald, whose pleasant chubby face would need that much defense against a world of grifters, bullies, bureaucrats, and lazy bums. His double-breasted tweeds bulged comfortably where his dinner should be just beginning to digest, and his cigar would be a dollar-fifty Panatela, judging by the smell of it. "What seems to be the trouble, Joe?" he asked the watchman, carefully. He had a cheerful, imperturbably composed if somewhat high-pitched voice.

"Aw, Mister Hancock, I dunno. This fellow says he's looking for a girl."

"Another one?" The horn-rimmed spectacles glanced quizzically over at my car, parked twenty yards away, then gleamed at me again and at my wallet I was holding out to them. "Uh-huh, I see. Insurance case?"

I shook my head, and returned the wallet. "Well, what is it?" he inquired, not in the least impatiently. "If we can help . . ." His tone implied he fully understood I'd had to stall the watchman with this silly business about a girl.

"It's quite a story, Mr. Hancock," I explained. "But you won't care to hear it, and I couldn't give it to you, not unless we can be sure your outfit is involved. Mind showing me the way you operate?"

He gleamed at me for just a moment. "Not at all. We don't have any secrets here. . . . You didn't mean to bring

the ladies in?"

"I'd like to, if I may."

"... You'll find they won't enjoy it much. And it's a little dangerous."

"I'll be responsible for them," I promised recklessly.

This time he hesitated longer. "Very well," he said at last, and waved the watchman back, who stood by glowering at me. "Jump in your car and stay behind me. Better take it slowly or you'll bust a spring." He put the station wagon into gear and eased it through the gate.

I hobbled over to the Packard, hit the starter and got rolling after him. The dog was instantly awake and leaning through the open window, pointed ears stiffly on guard. It was rough going, and the yard was even larger than I'd thought. Most of it was in darkness, and my headlights picked out piles of scrap as bulky as a house. We passed at least a score of those and pulled up at the loading dock—a hundred yards of raw cement, a tiny office bungalow, a somewhat larger operations shed of yellow brick and corrugated steel. That seemed to be the works, unless you counted in the arc lights and the cranes, the bulldozer, the railroad spur, the locomotive and the sixty-odd gondola cars.

The little woman said: "Now that we're here, suppose you tell us what in God's name this is all about." She didn't sound so chilly any more; there was a sweetly self-possessed demureness in her tone I recognized only too easily.

"I'm sorry, candy lamb. It won't take long."

"Johnny, you're not to leave us in this frightful place. You'll either take us with you or we'll have this out right now."

Kathy O'Neal said plaintively: "Please, may I stay?"

I am afraid . . . that is, I don't feel very well" She smiled at us, a wan and sickly smile, and laid her cheek against the back rest of the seat like any weary child.

"You'll stay here both of you," I said. "Manager's orders. If there is any disagreement about that, just say the word and I'll turn right around and drive you home."

Mrs. Suzanne Willet Marshall tossed her auburn curls and sneered into her lap. I slammed the Packard's door and climbed up on the loading dock. Hancock stood waiting for me at a tactful distance, near the office bungalow, which seemed to be unoccupied. Out in the open there, the night was hideous with the arc lights' glare, the crash and thunder of machinery. He saw my limp and shouted at me, pointing at it. "You all right?"

"Played golf this afternoon," I mouthed into his ear.

He grinned at me, a little doubtfully, and beckoned me along. The platform's edge beside the operations shed supplied a comprehensive view. No comment seemed to be required at all; it was a very pretty demonstration of what half a dozen men can do with half a million dollars' worth of heavy tools. What they were doing was essentially a fairly simple thing. They had a lot of scrap, and they were neatly and conveniently packaging the same for expedition to the mills.

There was, admittedly, a certain coarse brutality about it all, if you were halfway sentimentally inclined. The bulldozer would clip a ton or two of rusted bedsprings, builders' trusses, bicycles and baby buggies from the nearest pile and shove it over to the shed. The huge clambucket crane would pick it up and dump it in the yawning pit of the hydraulic press. The trap door would clang shut, the press would crunch and groan for thirty

seconds and the trap would hiss back open for the second crane to lower its magnetic scoop. This would lift out a handsome, solid iron brick, some three feet long by two feet square, and swing it through a dashing parabola, and stack it gently in the nearest open freight car on the railroad spur.

I checked them with my watch—it seemed to take them just about ten minutes to fill up a car. They'd load a train like this one in a single shift. The man beside me gleamed at me and pointed at the press. "Five hundred tons!" he shouted in my ear.

"Where do you get the stuff?" I yelled at him and swept an arm across the yard.

He shrugged and gestured back, good-humoredly. His gesture took in all creation, down to and including parts of it presumed to lie below our feet. I dutifully smirked for him and shouted: "Were you operating Thursday night?"

He shook his head and shrugged again. He didn't mind obliging me, but he saw very little reason to impair the flavor of a good cigar with all this tonsil exercise. The locomotive raised a raucous whoop and jerked its load ten yards ahead to put another empty gondola within the orbit of the cranes. The barrel-chested Negro foreman who'd climbed up beside us on the dock had heard my question and pushed back the visor of his cap. "Just catchin' up, sir," he informed me placidly. His rumbling bass appeared to have no trouble conquering the brawl.

I squeezed the grimace off my face and managed to catch Hancock's eye. He joined me strolling down the platform to the office bungalow. His key unlocked the place for us; a narrow corridor ran up between the bull

pen desks into his private den. He'd done all right with what there was of that. The furniture was real walnut and the rug an obviously genuine Azbekistan. The walls were paneled in a cheerful knotty pine. Their insulation had reduced the plant's chaotic racket to a background tremor, barely audible. He flicked the switches for the air-conditioner and pushed a rosewood humidor across the desk. The horn-rimmed glasses were still gleaming at me, and the gleam continued mildly disapproving. "Will this do?"

"This is just right."

"One gathers you were satisfied with what you saw."

"I'm satisfied you people are involved," I said. "There may be litigation, but I guess your liability insurance ought to cover it, and they'll have quite a time establishing your negligence."

He looked about as worried as a politician at an oyster fry. "Of course you realize I've no idea how we could possibly become involved in anything except our normal business," he pointed out.

I said: "You're not my client, Mr. Hancock, but the way the cards are dealt you're more or less entitled to sit in. I hope you've been around, and that your stomach doesn't bother you; this game we're playing isn't very nice. If you'll excuse me, I'll invite the ladies in. They have been heckling me all evening for an explanation, and we may as well get squared away on this."

His chubby features were a trifle dubious with me by now, but I was hobbling out already, through the bullpen office, down the platform to my car. Its offside door was open and the little woman stood beside it, waving to me urgently. Her petulance had disappeared; the frown she gave me merely showed concern. "Listen,

this kid is really sick. She lost her dinner, and her pulse is much too fast."

Kathy O'Neal lay stretched out on the Packard's front seat, breathing shallowly, her sleek brown hair wave wildly disarranged. The warm bright hazel eyes were now lack-luster, almost cloudy, and they looked at me with something of a pleading bashfulness. "I'm sorry, Mr. Marshall—John," she lisped.

"You think we ought to take her to a doctor?" Suzy asked me nervously.

"Not now. Let's bring her in. This fellow's office has a comfortable couch."

"But darling, if there should be something wrong with her . . ."

I reached into the car and lifted Kathy out. She didn't struggle, but she was as heavy as a corpse. The dog was watching from the rear seat, soberly, too self-possessed to show astonishment. I kicked the car door shut on him and started up the platform, not too gracefully. The little woman ran to follow us. "Here, let me help," she offered, suddenly composed, and grabbed my burden's feet.

Our host lost some of his *sangfroid* when we came staggering into his den. He jumped up from behind the desk and nearly dropped the stub of his cigar. His well-groomed hand reached for the phone. "You should have told me," he reproached me angrily.

"She'll be all right," I promised him.

"If this is some kind of a shakedown . . ." he began, and stared at Kathy on the couch, uncertainly. She moaned and tried to roll away from him, and he stepped forward for a closer survey. "Why, it's Miss O'Neal! There's been an accident?"

"You know her, Mr. Hancock?" I demanded carefully.

"I am acquainted with her, yes. She's Mr. Whitney's secretary, down at Federated Industries. Our company's a subdivision of their setup, so of course we've met. Now will you please explain?"

"That's what we're here for. But if you'll permit me to suggest it, all of us will be much better off if we relax," I said. "Let's try to deal with this as if it were just business routine. The damage has been done and cannot be repaired."

He gleamed at me, more than a little apprehensively. "This girl needs help," he pointed out.

Kathy lay quietly now, her pretty face turned to the wall. The dark-blue sweater had receded from her slacks and bared a star-shaped birthmark on the generous display of strong white flesh above those lushly curving hips. The little woman gently tucked it in for her and smiled at us, inscrutably.

"She may need help," I said. "But not the kind you're thinking of."

Our host threw up his hands and dropped into his high-backed swivel chair. I borrowed one of his cigars and absent-mindedly sniffed its bouquet of choice Havana leaf. My treatment filling was a blowtorch flame, but there are times when nothing less convincing than a blackjack on the skull will stop a man from playing God.

"This afternoon," I said, "a young and wealthy artist by the name of Barton Nichols was found dead in bed. He had been poisoned, sometime Friday night. The poison was a cyanide derivative used in photography, of which he kept a bottle in the darkroom at his home. It

had been substituted for the contents of at least two vitamin capsules for which he had developed an addiction, and the poisoned capsules had been slipped into his pocket where he would be sure to lay a hand on them.

"The killer had good reason to expect his death would pass for suicide. The day before, Bart Nichols had been jilted by his fiancée, and he was drunk, and desperate about the loss of her. On Friday night he'd had to throw a cocktail party for the painting of a movie star he'd just completed, and there were at least a hundred people who could testify he was in awful shape. But coroners are pretty smart, these days. And there was evidence that Bart had had another visitor that night, after the party guests had left. A man named Ray, who knew him well, who had a darkroom of his own, and who imagined he had cause to be upset with him."

"How do you know about this?" Hancock asked suspiciously. "You're not a cop." He did not look to be particularly shocked.

"Somebody had to find him first," I said. "His fiancée was missing and I had been hired by her employer to check up. This fellow Ray was an old boy friend from her college days who still ran after her, and he was under the impression that Bart Nichols was to blame for all of it. He has a prison record, and of course he was arrested on the spot."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand where we come in," said Hancock, pleasantly enough.

"You never will," I said, "unless you bear with me. Because that part of it would make no sense to you at all without a picture of the situation as a whole. Perhaps we should go back a bit, as far as last year's Christmas,

when a pretty redhead nurse whose name was Jean went with her roommate to a party and was introduced to Bart and set her cap for him. But they were socially far apart, so it took time and female artfulness to have her way with him. They did not even meet again for half a year, but finally, two weeks ago, her finger had his ring on it.

“There was a quarrel almost right away. She’d hoped he’d help her get into the movies, but he didn’t want an actress for a wife. He used his influence instead to block a screen test she’d been offered by a major studio. It seems he won his point, because last Wednesday she refused a second offer from a Mexican producer, telling him she would be married soon. And yet on Thursday evening at five-fifteen, Bart got a wire signed with her name—a Western Union wire that told him she was through with him.

“That Thursday evening she left her job at five, a little earlier than usual because she said she had a date. She had some trouble with her car, an ancient wreck she kept for sentimental reasons, and it was past six before she could get home. According to her roommate she was in a rush—she took a bath, changed clothes and packed a bag; she horrified the other girl by casually mentioning she’d broken her engagement, left her ring to be returned to Bart and drove off in her car without another word of explanation. Nothing has been heard from her since then, except at 7:35 a prowling car stopped her for a traffic violation, made her go into a service station where the man could fix her brakes and where she was accosted by another man, who very probably sold her some marijuana cigarettes. But those few things we only just found out about tonight.”

I paused for breath and dug a thumb into my jaw. The little woman watched me quietly with that same impenetrable smile. Kathy was stirring on the couch and moaning faintly, like a child in fever. Hancock had removed his glasses and was polishing them with a piece of yellow silk. He didn't look at me, but I had caught his ear.

"We got the case on Friday afternoon," I said. "It sounded like a simple one of girlish pique. We crashed Bart's party and met Miss O'Neal, who'd been a friend of his since they grew up together in San Joaquin. She proved to be the roommate, and we interviewed her in Bart's presence—he was drunk, of course, and half asleep, and in a bitter mood, but there's no doubt he listened carefully to most of what she told us. Later on that night, he drove her home to her and Jean's apartment, and we happened to be there and saw them in his car. We were surprised when he appeared to throw an unsuccessful pass at her. She seemed disturbed about it, too, but when we questioned her again she gave us information indicating Jean had gone to Mexico and that she was in trouble there. We left immediately by plane, and Miss O'Neal came with us, but the girl we found was not the one we sought."

"So you're still looking for her," Hancock said. "Of course a marijuana smoker might be almost anywhere."

I must have gleamed at him myself, that time. "This afternoon," I said, "when Ray had been arrested, I was not exactly satisfied. He had been there on Friday night, he'd had a motive and the necessary knowledge and the means. He acted like a guilty man—all former convicts do, when they're picked up again. But poisoned vitamins were out of character for him. If he'd have thought

of using poison, which I doubt, he would have put it in Bart's drink."

The little woman suddenly broke in. "Johnny, his fingerprints were on the bedroom wall! If he'd been planning to kill Bart, he'd have been sure to wear his gloves! He must have found him dead, and stumbled backwards from the shock."

"That had occurred to me," I said, and grinned at her approvingly. "And it occurred to me that someone else might possibly have had an even better motive, and a vastly better opportunity for taking care of Bart. A woman, for example, would have known about those vitamins of his, and might have known where she could find his darkroom cyanide. A woman might have made a pass at him, after he took her home, and slipped the capsules in his pocket. Women do make passes nowadays, I hear, and they look just the same when you are watching, only you don't think of that. And women get their feelings hurt when such a pass is blocked."

"But surely not enough to kill the man," said Hancock, startled with me now. He glanced at Kathy, who lay very still and quiet, and shook his head at me in patent disbelief.

"Not normally, I don't suppose," I said. "In this case, I'm afraid she did. You see, it wasn't simply that she was in love with him herself, and that he wouldn't play. This was a matter that involved her pretty skin.

"I told you he'd been listening when we were interviewing her, last Friday night. Of course he had already heard her story, but on that occasion she was forced to build it up a little, and he caught her in a lie. It was a very silly one, and quite unnecessary at that point, but murder always is a silly business. We asked her what

she'd done when Jean had left, the night before, and so she claimed she'd cooked a bite of supper for herself, and walked around the block, and taken in a movie. One of those corny Broadway musicals, she said. Now, it so happens *Broadway Cavalcade* is showing at the Coliseum, and that is the only theater within a mile or two from where she lives. But Thursday night, about the time she claimed to have been there, the Coliseum sneaked a preview of *Knight Errant* for the studio. Bart knew it, since the picture used one of his paintings for a major prop. We should have known it, too, because we'd heard Dick Cross, who starred in it, complain about the audience. But we missed out on it, and Bart did not. He must have tackled her with it as soon as we were gone, and she in turn could only try to stall him off, most likely with a yarn about Jean never having left at all, and with a promise to arrange a meeting in the morning, after he had sobered up. That gave her time right there to hunt for his supply of vitamins and cyanide, and fix him up a dose. In fact, she fixed up two or three, so he'd be sure to hit one soon. And just to see we didn't interfere, she shipped us off to Mexico and went along herself."

Our host ran an uncertain hand over the scanty remnants of his thin blond hair. He dropped the stub of his cigar into an ashtray shaped like a toy-size blast furnace on his desk and stared at it in puzzled concentration. "What you're making out there is that she'd already killed the other girl," he said. "Presumably in jealousy, or to remove her so she could have Bart herself. But these two girls had lived together for some time. They must have known each other well and shared each other's secrets. . . ."

"Not this kind of secret," Suzy said decisively. "Not where one of them had long been unsuccessful with a man, and saw the other one go after him and snap him up. That would be something she would never talk about. She'd merely fret and brood about it while she tried to break it up in nasty little ways. Like stirring up a row about a movie test, or seeing to it that this Mexican would have the number of her phone. And Jean would never be aware of that. I think the date she had last Thursday was with Bart, that they were going to elope that night, and that the night before, when Mr. Pardo called, she mentioned it to Kathy, who decided then and there to do away with her."

"It was a carefully considered murder, Mr. Hancock," I said harshly. "Miss O'Neal phoned in that telegram from her own office, at a time she could be reasonably sure it would reach Bart at least ten minutes after Jean had left her job. She then rushed home herself and settled down to wait; she must have worried quite a bit when Jean was late. And later on she really got a scare, because this fellow Ray came calling and demanded that she let him in. She had to see him in the living room, and by that time I rather think that Jean was dead already, for she must have killed her in her bath—it's the best method, on a chilly evening in an apartment without central heating; all you do is make a show of being gracious, bring in the electric heater and proceed to drop it casually in the tub.

"But she got rid of Ray somehow, and she was even capable of phoning Bart and putting on a big production about wanting him to talk to Jean and get her to make up with him. . . ."

Hancock, by then, was mopping up the sweat that

trickled on his chubby, amiable face. Without the spectacles his stare at Kathy was a mixture of myopic incredulity and angry consternation. "Miss O'Neal!" he spoke to her. "These people . . . Do you understand the accusations they are making? Have you anything to say?"

She did not even wince for him. He started to get up, and saw me shake my head, and dropped back in his chair reluctantly. "But if you're right, there must be something wrong with her," he told me nervously and pointed to his head.

"No, she's okay," I said. "She's just depressed. Some of them get like that. She must've hit the weed a little heavily, this afternoon. You realize, of course, that it was she who drove Jean's car that night, and got arrested for bad brakes, and bought more jujus from the peddler at the service station—she'd have needed them, and pretty badly too. All evening I've tried to round up witnesses who could identify her, but I didn't have much luck with it."

He put his handkerchief away and clapped the spectacles back on his nose and faced me with a hard, executive contempt. "What are you doing here?" he asked me sharply. "You've been talking all this time and you still haven't made it clear how we're supposed to be concerned. The mere coincidence that Miss O'Neal is an employee of our parent company . . ."

"Oh, that," I said. "That's no coincidence. That's how she knew about this place, and how it could be used. Do you remember from your medieval history a gadget called the Iron Virgin, Mr. Hancock?"

"Yes, of course." He thought about it for a minute, gleamed at me and suddenly sagged back into his chair.

The blood drained from his chubby features, leaving them a sickly greenish white.

"An execution instrument," I said. "A closet of forged iron, lined inside with pointed spikes and hinged to open in the middle. They'd put you into it and shut the door on you, for keeps. That was the way she'd planned it, Mr. Hancock. She put Jean's body in the trunk compartment of her car down in the alley back of her apartment house. She drove down here, and crashed a traffic light, and fooled those prowl car cops by showing them the driver's license from Jean's pocketbook. She slipped the car into your yard, most likely drove it by the railroad track, and parked it with the rest of all those wrecks you've got stacked up out there. She had to take the seat out, and remove the tires and license plates, and dump them on your trash heap, so the body of the car would look like scrap. But she's a pretty hefty wench, and after all those other tribulations she'd survived, that part of it would be a breeze. Of course we can't exactly *prove* that that's the way it was, because the car with Jean inside must have been dumped into that press of yours last Friday, and converted into just another iron brick, and shipped off to the mills. By now it should be in the furnace, at the rate they're working them these days."

He'd managed to suppress the horror of it, and his fist was pounding on the blotter, punctuating his excitement. "No, no, no! It's not like that at all! The press blew out a gasket, Friday morning, and we had to have one air-expressed from Baltimore we couldn't get installed until this afternoon! That's why we're working overtime, to catch up on arrears. And we've been processing a stack of smaller stuff tonight. My God, we may be coming to the heavy merchandise right now!"

He almost tumbled from his chair. I was already at the soundproof triplex window, peering out across the platform at the operations shed under the arc lights' glare. The carcass of a Pontiac sedan was dangling from the bucket crane and being dropped into the pit.

The little woman said: "What are you two big clever windbags waiting for?" Her cool soprano tones were deadly calm.

Hancock went rushing from the room. I hobbled after him and glanced across my shoulder; Kathy had rolled over on the couch and quietly vomited on Hancock's Oriental rug.

"Stay with her, cherry pie!" I ordered soberly, and hurried out.

The crane with the magnetic scoop was lifting out the Pontiac, or what remained of it, and dumping it into the nearest railroad car. The bucket crane had grabbed another carcass and was hovering with it above the pit. The bulldozer came clanking over with two more, and one of them, when it was pushed within the circle of the lights, showed up the stubby, stilt-backed lines of an old-fashioned black coupé. It was that close, and that much of a break. Hancock was running down the platform, yelling at the foreman, frantically waving at the engineer in the control room of the press. The trap door rumbled shut; the cranes stopped in mid-air. The 'dozer snorted to a halt.

I scrambled off the dock and limped across the muddy yard towards the black coupé. Its plates and wheels were gone, all right, and it looked just as battered and disreputable as a hundred other wrecks stacked up along the fence. But it was certainly a Plymouth, in a model of the early thirties, and in contrast with the others it

still carried headlights, and a broken windshield, and a wiper blade. A tiny animal was dangling from the rear-view mirror by a string; the 'dozer jockey stared at it with me and swore in quick surprise. It was a skunk that arched its back and waved its tail aloft, a very jaunty little skunk made of black velvet, striped with fluorescent paint.

The Negro foreman pounded up with Hancock in his wake. He'd brought a crowbar, and attacked the trunk compartment lid. It had been locked, and dented by the 'dozer blade; he had a lot of trouble with it, and the sweat stood out in beads over his rugged, grimly purposeful, yet terror-stricken face. When finally it grated open with a screech of tortured steel he backed away from it, and dropped the crowbar, and began to pray in his sonorous bull horn of a bass.

The week-end bag was there, a dainty little piece of alligator trimmed with gold. It had been crammed in last, on top of her, and promptly spilled its lacy contents in the mud. She wore the pearls around her neck; the terry towel that had served her for a shroud was oversize and showed a gaily patterned crimson plaid. The heady fragrance from a broken perfume bottle had been tainted only slightly by a more unpleasant redolence.

I turned away and put a hand on Hancock's arm. "You think it would have . . . worked? There wouldn't have been any traces visible or anything?"

"Of course it would have worked." He looked at me as if I should go back to school. "You've no conception of the pressure densities involved. She would have wound up in the middle of the motor block, with maybe six or seven cubic inches of her left."

I squeezed my jaw for him and said: "Let's go and use your phone."

From down the platform, Khan struck up a sudden piercing howl. I stiffened in my tracks, then broke into a clumsy, painfully uneven run. Before I'd covered half the distance he was tearing up the inside of my car and snarling like a demon in a cage. The little woman staggered from the office bungalow and held her head with both her hands. The sweetly carved cameo of her face was pale, and furiously mortified.

"Oh, darling, hurry quick! She got away from me!"

The dog caught sight of both of us and quieted down. I leaned a shoulder on the wall and nursed my aching instep. "Shall we dance?"

"Johnny, *please* don't be funny now. We've got to get her back!"

"I guess we do. Except she hasn't any place to go. And I'm not being funny, sugar bun. It's just a matter of regaining one's perspective in this sort of thing. Are you all right?"

"... She knocked me cold. She asked me for a cigarette, and while my hands were occupied she grabbed an ashtray off the desk and hit me on the head! I've got a lump that's bigger than a grapefruit. . . . Are you coming?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," I said wearily and trotted after her into the parking lot.

My key was still in the ignition, but the Packard wouldn't have been taken by a gangster with a sub-machine gun, not with Khan in it. The station wagon and some half a dozen smaller cars I'd noticed on arrival were all present and accounted for. Our quarry was on foot, and probably still somewhere on the

grounds. I switched my spotlight on and started for the gate at thirty miles an hour, crashing through the pot-holes and the ruts as if we were a tank patrol in no man's land. The watchman must have seen us coming, but he didn't show until my horn blast blew him from his shack.

"... Mister, I told ya oncet before. This ain't no place for girls."

"Well, this is not a girl," I said. "This is a genuine, authentic, eighteen-carat witch, in spades. You'll have to stop her, Joe, if she comes out this way. I don't suppose she will, but if you let her by I'll have you in the Army in a week!" I stuck my foot into the Packard's carburetor and went roaring down the highway, back to town.

Suzy protested: "Darling, where for Heaven's sake..."

"Will you relax? I know exactly where. She couldn't get across the fence—it has barbed wire on top, to keep the kids away. But there's a back road somewhere by that switchyard spur. That's how she got Jean's car inside."

The Long Beach highway traffic signal changed to green when we turned south on squealing tires. The distant keening of a siren on Marquette was closing rapidly. That would be Prowl Car Forty-four, and this time on a real beef, Code Three. I let them go and searched the shoulder of the highway for the gap I knew had to be there. It came at last; a narrow culvert spanned the ditch, a strip of gravel dipped under the embankment carrying the main-line railroad and continued east along the switchyard right of way. The sign said **PRIVATE ROAD KEEP OUT**.

They must have meant us, too, and they were right,

only I never thought of that. We were perhaps a hundred yards inside, and rolling briskly on the gravel, when my spotlight beam picked up a solitary figure wearing slacks and sweater walking up to meet us, very fast if not quite steadily. The figure saw us, wavered for a second, then abruptly broke away and started running at an angle from the line of our approach, across the yard. I spoke a naughty word and slammed the brakes on hard, and hit the road before the Packard skidded to a stop. The little woman tumbled after me, and Khan immediately cleared the seat and shouldered out in turn. I grabbed his collar and he growled at me. I slapped his fierce black muzzle for him, tried to drag him back into the car. He casually braced himself and bared a fang.

Suzy was watching us, unsmilingly, and swiveling the spotlight beam around. Our quarry was still in it, flitting like a ghost across the sidings, racing wildly on the cinder bed. "Take over," I said sharply. "Both of you stay here. She can't go anywhere—I'll catch her in five minutes flat."

"See if you can make us," Suzy offered coldly and ran off into the yard. The dog immediately tore himself out of my grip and bounded after her.

I swore at them, not very fluently, and started galloping over a lot of rails and ties myself. It was rough exercise, and not particularly healthy business. The yard was working, marshaling a freight or two, and there were strings of boxcars, flats and reefers being shunted on a dozen tracks. The place seemed like a rocky jungle full of whistles, red lanterns and jarring bumps. From somewhere down the main line blinked the single angry sparkle of a Diesel engine's headlight, homing in on us.

That had to be the San Diego flyer, outward bound and highballing along.

The dog was ranging far ahead of us, and baying rhythmically with the tempo of his stride. He could have taken Kathy long ago, which was exactly what I'd wanted to prevent, because on previous occasions his idea of taking anybody had involved two broken legs, a fractured spine and half a jugular chewed out. But on this trip I was surprised to see him roving in a loop and making a deliberate attempt to head her off. It made him look almost ridiculously like a German shepherd rounding up a stray black lamb, which was about as much in character for him as Joseph Stalin kissing babies would have been in character.

Then, suddenly, my stomach froze again. I managed to forget my damaged instep and put on an extra burst of speed. Khan had succeeded in his purpose very well indeed. He'd circled her, and got ahead of her, and turned on her, and stopped her cold. Now he was forcing her to back away from him, not by an actual attack but simply by the threat of one. He never came within ten feet of her, but that was close enough—two hundred pounds of truculent great Dane will make a tiger back away.

The trouble was that both of them had crossed the mainline track already, and the dog was herding her into the San Diego flyer, which came roaring almost right on top of them. The way I saw him do it looked as if he'd timed it just like that, and calculated every pass he made at her to keep her occupied and drive her to within an inch of where he wanted her. It was such perfect gaslight melodrama that I almost felt the urge to hiss at both of them. Of course it never did come off

in quite that flawless kind of a performance, for the Diesel hooted at her, and she cleared its path with maybe twenty yards to spare. . . .

The little woman screamed, in instant horrified alarm. I hit her with a flying tackle from behind and threw her to the cinders, less than reaching distance from the second track, on which a small old-fashioned locomotive bustled by with half a dozen oil tank cars in tow.

We never heard a second scream, or any kind of noise except the rocketing of iron wheels on iron, and that sound is one I can still hear right now. It doesn't bother me a lot, but I can hear it any time I want.

10

DR. ELMER B. WITTELS was right on the job, at nine o'clock on Monday morning. He wore a clean and freshly starched white jacket, and his blandest moonfaced smile. When I walked in he clowned a brisk salute for me, in due remembrance of our Army days when I'd outranked him by one grade. "Good morning, Major Marshall, sir, and how are you today?"

"Oh, pretty fair," I said, and dug into my cheek.

"Still sensitive, is it?" he wondered, and dismissed the act. "Okay, let's have a peek."

I dropped into his torture chair and let him put a bib around my neck. "You're lucky," he informed me cozily while laying out his instruments. "My nine o'clock appointment's in the hospital. Her husband phoned just now—he owes me a cigar, it seems. Well now, lessee—mmm."

"Stop making like a humming bird," I said. "Just tell me what it is."

He was still smiling, but his tone had grown bewildered. "Well, to be quite frank with you, I'm not exactly sure. Looks like your filling's gone AWOL. That's not supposed to happen—even if you're careless with it, some of it will stick. This one's completely disappeared." He reached into his locker for a little brown-glass bottle, opened it and sniffed at it, and poured a drop from it on glass. "Mmm. Mislabeled. Glycerin instead of eugenol."

"Oh, fine," I said. "Sounds like you've lost a tooth for me."

"No, no, your molar's quite all right. Just sensitive. We'll fix that up right now." He went into his lab and came out with a larger storage bottle, put the little one aside and let me smell the new arrival. "This is eugenol, or oil of cloves. It's mixed with powdered zinc oxide. It sticks, and kills the pain, and disinfects. The glycerine just washes out. Miss Hendrix filled that bottle, Thursday afternoon. I guess she must've got confused, which isn't like her very much. Say, that reminds me, did you find her yet?"

I nodded, and his smile improved. "Well, good for you. How is she, Marshall?"

"Sorry, Doc," I said. "It was a pretty nasty accident. She wasn't found until last night."

He put the bottle down and lost a little of his ruddy color, but his clever pudgy hands were on his instruments already, steady as a rock. "Ah, that's a shame," he mentioned carefully. "She was a lovely girl. Best nurse I ever had. Her fiancé must be all broken up."

"He killed himself," I said.

"Is that a fact!" He shook his head and clucked his tongue at me. "It's certainly surprising, Marshall, isn't it, the things that happen all around you. Dreadful things, to people you know well. Diseases, accidents, a suicide, and nothing you can do about it. Is Miss Hendrix . . . ah, you know, somebody taking care of her?"

"Yeah, that part's all set up," I said. "One of Bart's friends is handling it. A movie star who doesn't like publicity."

"That's swell." His moon smile came back on. He stuffed my mouth with cotton wool and hung a suction

drainer on my lower lip. He got busy with mortar and pestle again. "This time we'll do it right."

The flame that was still burning in my jaw subsided within seconds after he had fussed with it some more. He left the drainer and the cotton wool in place and said: "Excuse me just a minute," and sat down behind his desk. I stared out through the window at the distant canyons, at the ripe blue California winter sky and at the traffic buzzing up and down Wilshire Boulevard, twelve floors below. Doc Wittels seemed to be conversing with a Miss Delaney on the telephone. I didn't listen, not until he laughed, perhaps a trifle hollowly, and told her he'd prefer a redhead if she had one on her books.

He put the phone back in its cradle, washed his hands and took the plugs out of my mouth. "Employment agency," he said. "They're sending up another nurse." He smiled a half-apology. "You know, a dentist's office needs a woman's hand. Professionally speaking. Mmm, lessee, how's Friday afternoon for you, at 4:15?"

"It sounds all right," I said. "If I get hung up on a case, I'll call you, Doc. Oh, by the way, you can forget about those fifty bucks. We really didn't have to put in too much time for you."

Downstairs my car was waiting in the parking lot. The little woman sat behind the wheel; the dog lay snoring peacefully in the tonneau.

"Johnny, how did it go?"

"Okay, I guess. He fixed me up."

"But what was his reaction? Wasn't it an awful shock to him? Did he believe you?"

"Sure he did. Why shouldn't he?"

She frowned at me and moved along the seat to let me in. "Of course," she said, "a *dentist* . . . After all, I

don't suppose he'd understand, and as it is, if Dick picks up the check he is entitled to a little privacy."

"From us, he is," I said. "I'm not so sure about the rest of it. A hundred-million dollar studio, two dozen cops and county employees, and quite a few reporters like Sam Levy who should know the score except they're told to play it dumb. Sometimes I think the picture industry draws just a little too much water in this town. It's funny when you see the way a fellow like Dave Hogan tries to get back something of his own. He knew last night that Ray was not the killer, but he figured that as long as we got paid for it with movie money he'd just tend his chickens and sit back and let us work it out."

"I know," the little woman said. "Darling, I have been worrying if I should tell you this, but last night really was my fault. Because that picture Bart had on the wall, it shows a star-shaped birthmark just above the hip. I noticed it while you were in the bedroom, and of course I'd seen the girl undressed."

"Oh, that," I said. "You think I'm blind? Remember when she was in such a hurry taking off her clothes last Friday night, before the lights went out, because the fuse was out of order after what she did to it with that electric heater on the night before? That's where I got my inspiration, cherry pie."

She laughed, not altogether pleased, and lightly slapped my cheek, the one that didn't have the plug below. I grinned at her and kicked the starter button and rolled out of there. We'd had our breakfast around four that morning at the Hall of Justice; it was time to find some liquids for my lunch.

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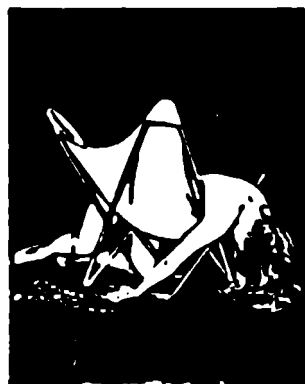
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